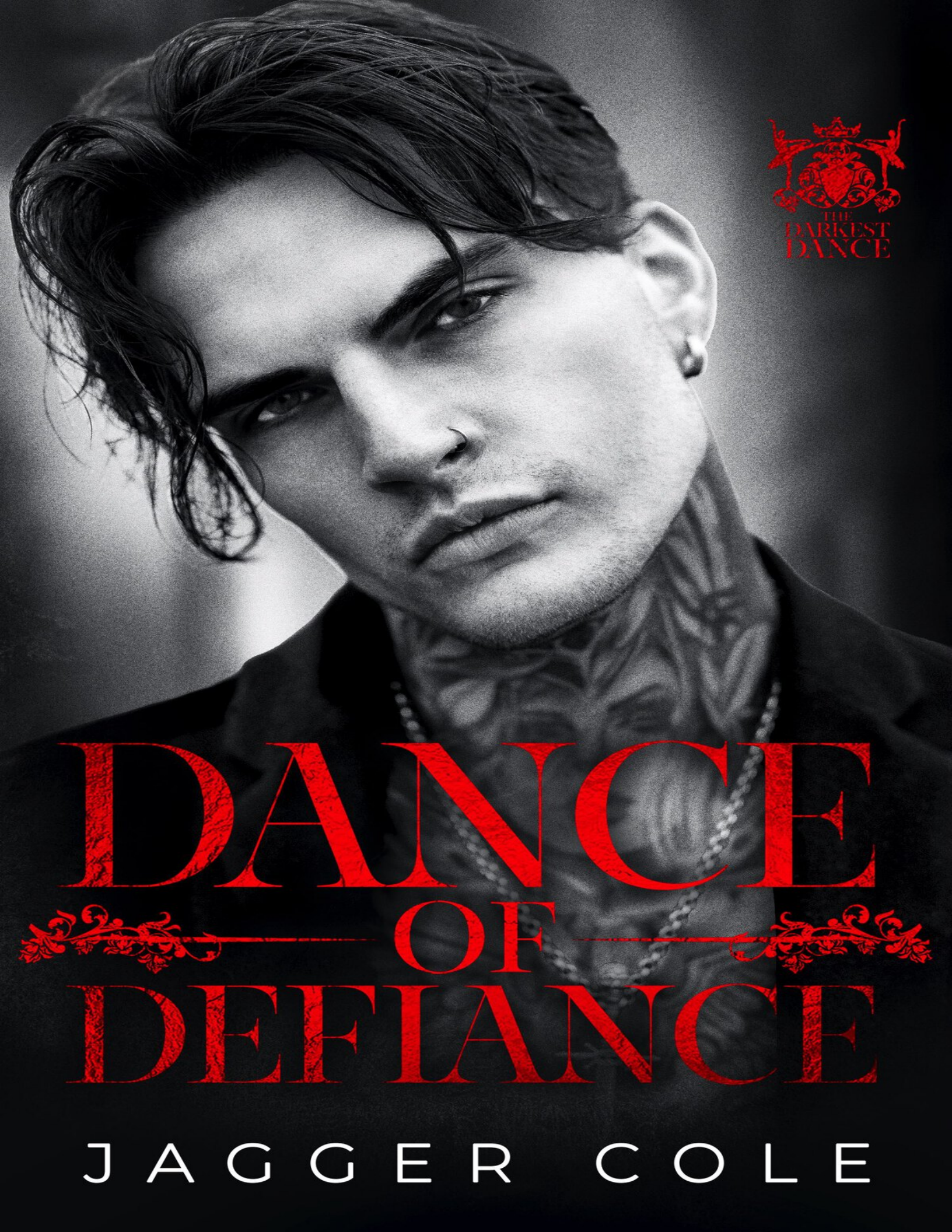
THE DARKEST DANCE
DANCE OF DEFIANCE
JAGGER COLE

DANCE OF DEFIANCE

A DARK MM MAFIA ROMANCE

JAGGER COLE

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Dirty Thoughts - Chloe Adams
Man On A Mission - The Black Keys
Crazy - Natalie Jane
Dancing On My Own - Robyn
When You Say My Name - Chandler Leighton
Shapeshifter - Lorde
DAISIES - Justin Bieber
Lost Highway - NightCrawl
Don’t Delete The Kisses - Wolf Alice
Tessellate - alt-J
Radioactive - Eric Serenade
Chin Up - Sam Fender
Tonight, Tonight, Stephen Wilson Jr.
Stay With Me - Sam Smith
Overcome - Skott
The Only Exception - Paramore
Vienna - Billy Joel
Lilac Wine - Jeff Buckley
WAKE ME UP I’M DROWNING - Noah Gundersen
Fyrsta - Ólafur Arnalds
Wrecking Ball - Miley Cyrus

DEVOTION - Justin Bieber, Dijon
Breathe Me - Sia

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TRIGGER WARNING

Dear Reader,

This book, like many of my books, contains darker, graphic themes and elements. In addition to mild BDSM and bondage, homophobia, self-harm/suicide, childhood sexual assault, and addiction feature *very* heavily in this story.

While these scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth story, they may be triggering to some readers. *Please* know your own triggers and limits, and read with that in mind.

Thanks for reading,

Jagger

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1

ROMAN

I'VE ALWAYS FOUND power in strength. In sheer will. In maintaining complete control over everything around me.

Tough it out. Be brutal. Be unmerciful.

Be a man.

Some people say "brute strength doesn't solve everything" or "brains are better than brawn". But not one of those people ever had their back against the wall with a gun to their head. When you're looking annihilation in the eye, there's no time to "think things through" or "weigh the options".

At that point, it's sink or swim. Do or do not.

Live or die.

Brute strength has served me well for most of my years. It's part of the way of life that's been hammered into me, being brought up in the Bratva.

Not just brought up in it, either. Brought up to *lead* it, as the crown prince to the Nikitin throne—heir to Pavel Nikitin himself.

In this world—my world—control, strength, brutality, and the will to crush your enemies is the difference between life and death.

Tough it out. Be brutal. Be unmerciful.

Be a fucking man.

Tonight, that brute strength allowed me to knock out the guard who wandered too far from the others, drag him into a storage closet, tie and gag him, and steal his mask and uniform.

I glance down at myself. Fuck. I deliberately chose a guard who looked roughly my size. But the all-black suit I've just changed into is maybe half a size too small. And the mask…

Shit.

Apparently, the guy I just took down is a smoker, and the inside of his mask *reeks* like an ashtray.

"*You know those things'll kill you, right?*" I grunt at the unconscious guard. I drop to my haunches and double check his binds and gag.

The chloroform I gave him should keep him out for the next thirty minutes. And then when he wakes up he'll be too weak to do anything but grunt and maybe writhe around on the floor for another half hour after that.

Fingers crossed, I'll be long gone by then.

I straighten my foul-smelling mask and my too-tight suit, then step out of the storage closet and into one of the opulent hallways of the cliffside mansion. A quick glance to either side, then I slip the metal flask out of my pocket and take a small swig.

Absolute control. Sheer will. Power in strength. Booze doesn't hurt, either.

The vodka burns my throat as I slip the flask into my breast pocket. Then I turn and make my way down the hallway, fitting the earpiece I lifted from my new knocked-out friend into my ear. The security channel crackles to life.

"Perimeter, check in. The Marquis and his guest will enter the main hall momentarily. Coms clear, go."

I listen as various gruff male voices start to echo back: "perimeter one, all clear", "perimeter two, all clear". When there's a pause after six that stretches a little too long, I clear my throat.

"Perimeter seven, all clear", I mutter quietly.

Eight through ten check in as I continue down the hallway. I freeze as another man in a featureless mask dressed in an all-black suit—both exactly like mine—walks by. He nods wordlessly. I nod back.

If there's a secret, unspoken code with any of this, I'm *fucked*. Actually, there are about a hundred different ways this could go sideways that would result in me being utterly and royally screwed. Luckily, the other guard just keeps making his rounds through the sprawling mansion-slash-lodge as I head down the hall to the main attraction of the evening.

Or, rather, what *will* be the main attraction.

Blackbriar Hall sits perched high on the edge of a cliff in the Adirondack Mountains, six hours north of New York City. It was originally built by the Vanderbilts, or the Carnegies, or some other gazillionaire family from the turn of the century. They used it as a "weekend getaway camp".

Personally, I'm not sure words like "camp" or "hall" really suit a place that's one hundred and two *thousand* fucking square feet. But whatever. I'm not here to assess the real estate.

The fact that I'm here *at all*, thought, is maybe a…questionable decision.

Okay, it's *definitely* a questionable decision. Actually, no—let's just go ahead and upgrade "questionable" to "fucking terrible". Pretty much any one of my father's men would have gladly taken this mission tonight and would have been more than capable of doing it. Plus, if *they* got caught infiltrating the place, they could easily deny any ties to the Nikitin Bratva.

If Pavel Nikitin's only son gets caught with his hand in the proverbial cookie jar? That's another story.

Well. The easy solution to that potentially nuclear issue is *don't get caught*.

Up ahead, at the end of the darkened corridor, low lights gleam from the main hall. I pause, disappearing into the shadows and tugging the flask out of my pocket once more to wet my throat.

Bonus, the vodka on my breath is at least somewhat neutralizing the cigarette stench of my mask. I exhale slowly after I swallow, rolling my shoulders as the comforting, familiar heat pools in my stomach.

Absolute control. Sheer will. Power in strength.

Again, almost any of my father's men could have done this tonight. But a strong Bratva leader doesn't issue decrees and orders from a cushioned throne. He gets his hands dirty. He does the heavy lifting.

That is why I decided it was me myself that was going to do this tonight.

Bullshit. You're overcompensating for your sickness. For the corruption in your blood. For the thing you need to cut out of yourself…

My jaw tightens and I swallow heavily.

Shut the fuck up.

I yank the flask out of my pocket again and take another deep drink. This is what keeps me sane.

Or at least, keeps me from drowning in the darkness.

The end of the hallway opens out onto a grand mezzanine that rims the second-floor perimeter of the three-story main banquet hall of the sprawling estate. Huge chandeliers hang from the glass, vaulted ceiling above, with flickering gaslight sending a warm glow over the main hall and the guests seated below, as if this was the main dining hall at Hogwarts.

But, you know, villains and loaded guns, instead of brooms and owls.

Keeping my shoulders back, I slowly make my way around the mezzanine until I find a quiet corner with a nice marble pillar to slink behind. I adjust the ring on my finger as I rest my hand on the marble railing, angling my knuckles in the direction of the crowd below. I thumb the underside of the metal band, triggering the tiny digital camera built into the carved bull's head set into the silver.

Fuck, this James Bond shit always gets my pulse thudding and my muscles tightening. A rush of adrenaline courses through my veins as the hum of the vodka tingles at the edges of my perception, keeping me in that sweet spot where I operate so well.

"Look alive, gentlemen." The voice crackling in my stolen earpiece pulls my attention. "The Marquis and Signor Sangrini are entering the main hall

via the front left door momentarily."

My pulse jumps despite the alcohol, and the hairs on the back of my neck prickle as I sink a little deeper into the shadows behind the marble pillar. Bravado, alcohol, and sheer arrogance have gotten me this far, pretty much without issue, but I'm suddenly *viciously* aware how bad it would be if I were to be found out.

I swallow, looking down at the exquisitely set banquet tables with elegantly dressed guests from all manner of sordid underworld circles: various American Mafia, Bratva, the Italian Camorra, one or two Chinese Triads, the Columbian Cartel, even some Yakuza clans out of Japan.

There are representatives from families even older and more powerful than all those, too: criminal empires so vast, wealthy, powerful, and deeply entrenched that you see them and their political influence every day but don't even realize it.

Because when a meeting between the leader of the Obsidian Syndicate and the head of the oldest, most powerful underworld banking institution on the planet goes down?

Everyone puts on their Sunday best and comes out to pay their respects.

The assembled guests stop their various conversations, stand from their seats, and fall silent when the tall, broad-shouldered man in black materializes from the shadows and steps into the flickering light. I angle my ring toward him as he walks across the slightly raised dais at the head of the grand banquet hall which holds the table of honor, then comes to a stop in front of his captive audience.

This would be "the Marquis", otherwise known as Vaughn Bancroft.

We've never met face to face. In a weird way, though, it almost feels like we have. My sister, Evie, dances professionally in the Zakharova Ballet with Vaughn's younger brother, Val. And while the two men aren't twins, they're close in age, and the resemblance between them is freakishly uncanny sometimes.

Same eyes. Same sharp, chiseled features and facial structure that give them a look that blends aristocrat and ruffian. Vaughn even has similar tattoos in

similar places as his brother, like the faint but ornate ink you can see peeking out the top of his collar. The similarities stop there, though: Vaughn's forearms are bare, while his younger brother’s tattoos continue down his arms and over the backs of his hands, like mine.

“Welcome, all.”

Vaughn hasn’t raised his voice. But there’s a flinty, dark power in it that sends it booming through the cavernous hall. The gaslight flickers, as if just the raw surge of his voice has shifted the very air.

Part of me wants to roll my eyes at the theatrics: the Gilded Age forest estate, the low, flickering light, the featureless masks of the guards…even using an overblown title like “the Marquis”, for fuck's sake.

But I don’t; roll my eyes, that is. First, it would be the height of hypocrisy to begrudge Vaughn his masks and theatrics, given *my own* fondness for using both in a certain secret society that I belong to.

Secondly, my attention is suddenly pulled from Vaughn to a similar, yet more familiar face. My throat works and my brow furrows as I watch Val slip noiselessly into the banquet hall through a side door, nodding once to the two guards glancing his way before immediately pulling his shiny black mask over his face.

The fuck is he doing here?

I mean, his brother is the head of the Obsidian Syndicate and the host of tonight’s…whatever-the-fuck this is. But Val isn’t involved in his brother’s underworld dealings, as far as I’m aware.

He’s no mobster. He’s a professional ballet dancer, like Evelina. A famously wild partier who, according to my sister, is as known for his sexual conquests—of both men and women—as he is for his talents as a dancer. Possibly more.

He rides motorcycles, smokes, dresses like a 70’s punk icon in black leather jackets, ripped jeans and rock t-shirts, wears his hair longish and shaggy, and basically thumbs his nose at any and all authority.

The times we've crossed paths, usually via my sister, he's mostly annoyed the *fuck* out of me.

Mostly.

The black spark flickers inside me. But I refuse to let my sickness take hold. Not now. Not ever. *Definitely* not while I'm trying to get what I came for tonight.

I retreat around the back of the pillar and slip the flask out to take another sip of control.

"Please join me in welcoming our esteemed guest and my good friend, Signor Cosimo Sangrini."

I glance back around the side of the pillar as muted applause welcomes a man to the stage that truly needs no introduction. Not to this crowd.

Cosimo Sangrini is the *thirtieth*—I'm not kidding—Sangrini to helm his family's underworld banking empire, one that stretches all the way back to the fucking *Crusades*, when the Sangrini family bankrolled the Knights Templar in their conquests.

Today, the Sangrini family is one of those hidden powers I was talking about: one you see and whose influence you feel daily, you just have no idea that you do. And in the world in which *my* family operates, cozying up to Cosimo is like an actor becoming besties with Steven fucking Spielberg, or a cardinal getting tight with the Pope.

The problem—and the reason I'm here tonight—is that the Nikitin Bratva obviously isn't the only underworld empire to understand that.

Case in point, tonight's banquet involving the who's-who of the criminal underbelly, hosted by Vaughn at his evil Bond villain mountain retreat.

Cosimo Sangrini is in his late thirties. Like Vaughn, he's a good-looking, well-dressed man who *breathes* raw power. His black hair is slicked back and his flinty, steel-colored eyes scan the room as a slight smile—more a smirk—touches his too-perfect lips. He dips his chin graciously to the crowd and then gives Vaughn another calculating smile.

My ring clicks away, snapping pic after pic of the two of them shaking hands up there on the dais.

I smile grimly.

I know what this evening is about. I know why Vaughn’s rolled out the red carpet for his "esteemed guest". But that’s a discussion I’ll have with my father *after* I show him these images.

I glance down at the crowd as I make my way through the shadows of the mezzanine, looking for a better vantage point from which to shoot and to see if I can pick up anything with the hidden microphone that's also concealed in my ring. Finally, I slide into a shadowy alcove looking right down onto the dais from the side.

There's a slight scuff of footsteps that gives the guy's presence away a millisecond before he grabs me. But it’s not enough time for me to react before the fucker wraps a strong arm around my neck, spins me around, and shoves me into a dark hall that splits off from the mezzanine.

I grit my teeth and ram an elbow back, catching him in the ribs. A triumphant grin spreads over my face when I hear the satisfying “*ughngh*” of pain. But it fades when he suddenly grabs both my wrists and yanks them behind my back.

I choke out a breathless grunt as he pins me, *hard*, forcing my arms back at an odd angle that keeps my cheek flat to the stone wall of the dark hallway.

Whoever the guy is, he’s fucking *strong*.

I go to shove away again, throwing my elbows back and trying to stomp on his foot. But he’s too fucking fast, and suddenly, the world lurches sideways as my legs are knocked clean out from under me.

Shit.

In half a second, the motherfucker’s rolled me over his shoulder like a goddamn wrestler, then slammed me to the ground on my back. I try to scramble to my feet, but his entire weight immediately comes down on my sternum as he plants himself on my lower chest, his muscled thighs either side of my torso. I take a vain swing at him before he grabs my wrists and

shoves my hands back, pinning them above my head to the polished stone floor.

An alien, destructive force wrenches, writhes, and twists through my body.

This kind of thing doesn't happen to me. I'm six-four, two hundred and forty pounds of lean muscle, and I've been fighting and training since I was *six*.

Nobody surprises me, drops me, and pins me down.

Not ever.

And yet…here we are.

I grit my teeth, hissing as I flex my muscles uselessly, trying to shove the fucker off me. But we're about the same size, and his grip isn't loosening one bit as he looms over me. Piercing, ice-blue eyes slice into me like knives through the eyeholes of his mask. Eviscerating me. Cutting me open and *dissecting me*, scooping out all the dirty little secrets.

Seeing all the poison and corrupt blood inside me.

I snarl, pushing against him as his weight settles onto me, his large, tattooed hands effortlessly keeping my wrists pinned to the floor.

He leans down lower. Those all-consuming, frozen, ice-blue eyes stab right into me.

Freezing me to the spot.

Shattering my strength.

"*You*," he growls in a low, almost sultry tone that sends a foreign and yet familiar sensation creeping up my spine.

My breath catches as he quickly brings his face another six inches toward mine. The low light from the hall behind us catches in his eyes, making them look like twin oceans on fire.

"You don't belong here…*Roman*."

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2

ROMAN

A PULSE THROBS in my head like a drum beating…beating…*fucking beating* into my psyche as I stare up into icy blue eyes.

Time slows to a crawl. My very blood feels like it has turned to syrup in my veins and my surroundings fade away until it's just me lying on the floor and the masked man with venomously blue eyes flaying me open, laying bare every single dark, poisonous secret I have.

Don't see it.

Don't see that part of me.

My chest tightens, and not just from the weight planted on it. My throat feels like it's closing up—tightening and squeezing until I can barely breathe.

How the fuck does he know who I am?

"Your suit is too small, *Roman*," the man growls softly, as if reading my thoughts.

Why is he not calling down the thunder on me? Why is there no radio alert to the other guards?

"And the guards here don't exactly walk around sipping from a fucking flask while they're on duty," he murmurs, his eyes still boring right into my soul.

Who the FUCK is this?

My eyes flit over his glossy black mask, then slip lower. For a moment, when my gaze lands on the ink swirling out from his shirt collar, my brain short circuits.

Vaughn.

For half a second, I try to make sense of how the man on the dais below has made his way up here, gotten the jump on me, and now has me pinned to the ground, the weight of his body on mine.

But then my eyes flick to the side, and I freeze.

There's ink on his arms, peeking out from underneath his sleeves. More ink swirling over the backs of his hands, hands with long, veined fingers wrapped tight around my wrists, immobilizing me.

Not Vaughn.

"*Val*—?!"

"What the *fuck* are you doing here?" he hisses, glaring right into my eyes.

I try to swallow past the roaring, twisting, clenching sensation that has momentarily arrested my ability to breathe normally or think straight. To think at all, for that matter.

"*How*—?"

"Your hand tats," he growls under his breath, his gaze sliding from my face to where he's got my wrists pinned against the stone floor.

Shit.

"The flask, too."

Double shit.

"And that suit…Jesus, man, think you could have found a tighter fit?"

I'm thinking of the right words to throw back in his face when I see the glint—or is it a *twinkle*—in his eyes as he grins under his mask.

“Not,” he murmurs, tipping his head to the side, “that I’m *complaining*, of course.”

Confusion swirls through me as I feel his gaze slide back over my face, then down to my chest, before it drags up over my immobilized arms.

What the—what, are you BLUSHING?

“*Get OFF me*,” I snap in a harsh whisper.

Val doesn’t move. He doesn’t even blink as those icy blue eyes stab into me.

“I *said*—”

“Oh, I heard you the first time.”

My eyes narrow. “So why the *fuck* aren’t you—”

“Because I’m still waiting for your answer to *my* question.”

I say nothing.

Val exhales slowly. “The masks fucking suck, right?”

“What?”

“These masks,” he grunts, shifting his weight slightly, causing his thighs to squeeze around my ribs. “They’re fucking hot, sweaty, *slightly* overdramatic…”

His grip on my wrists loosens just a bit, and I take my shot. With a grunt, I flex my arms and shove at his hands, wrenching my right wrist free. I swing hard, snarling. Val jerks his head back, but my fist still connects with the edge of his jaw, knocking his mask askew and making him swear under his breath.

Then, just as quickly as I made my move, he counters. Faster than I’d ever believe him capable of, the guy has my fucking wrists slammed back to the floor again, keeping me pinned hard as his weight settles on me once more. His muscled thighs squeeze around my ribs, as if to remind me how little power I have right now.

How the *fuck* is he so fucking strong? I mean I'm—not to mince words—*jacked*. I lift heavy weights, daily. I'm with a training bag at least four times a week. I'm also in underground fights twice a month, minimum. Val is…a *ballet dancer*.

I grimace as every single joke I've made over the years to Evie, however good-naturedly, about ballerinas "not being real athletes" comes back to haunt me. I suddenly consider that Val's one of the guys on stage lifting the female dancers—sometimes one-handedly—as if they weighed nothing at all.

Okay, shit. The guy is a lot stronger than I'd have guessed. And he *needs* to get the fuck off me. Now.

"Fucking let me go," I snap. "Or I'll—"

"What."

His smirking, slightly unhinged grin is uncovered now that his mask has been knocked off. His wild, dark hair frames his high, sculpted cheekbones and his sharp jawline. His crystal blue eyes lance into me with a dangerous glint.

"Or you'll *what*, Roman," he grins. "Wait for me to loosen my grip again to test your reaction time? Yeah, I'm definitely doing that. Except how about this time, I give you a three second countdown so you can get the jump on me for sure."

I glare wordlessly at him.

"That was a joke, by the way."

"*Yeah*," I mutter. "I got it."

He sighs, settling his bulk onto me. His hands tighten around my wrists…

And an odd tingle, a single *zap* of feeling, starts like a hum in the middle of my chest and then sparks out like an electric jolt to my extremities.

You have a sickness. A corruption. Something that needs to be cut out of you…

I squeeze my eyes shut behind my mask as my throat tightens, choking off my own breath as blackness begins to swirl.

“No, Roman, you’re not dreaming,” Val sighs. “As much of a dreamboat as I am.”

I open my eyes to glare up at him again. His lips curl at the edges in a smug grin as he winks at me. “See? I’m still here. Lucky boy.”

“*Get. Off.*”

His brows arch, the smug grin lingering on his lips. “Get off as in you’re telling *me* to get off? Or are you asking me to get *you* off? Because, Roman, I have to say, a little *please* goes a long way—”

“*Stop fucking around!”* I snarl as I struggle in his grip. But, Christ, he’s goddamn immobile. And the more I try to shove at him, the more his hands tighten around my wrists.

The harder his strong, muscular thighs squeeze either side of my body.

The hotter his strong frame burns into mine.

And the more that fucking zapping sensation keeps sparking through my stomach, turning me inside out and sending my brain into spasms of uncontrollable thoughts.

Val tilts his head to the side, eying me in a slightly off-kilter, maniacal way that sucks the air from my lungs. His grip tightens on my wrists, and when it does, a little sound escapes my throat.

Val pauses, one brow arching slowly and dramatically. “Now, what was *that*?”

I swallow. “That was me grunting.”

“I think I like it when you grunt.”

“You *need* to get the fuck—”

“Yeah, no, we’ve already covered that. Catch up, Roman.”

When I glare at him again, he takes another deep breath and lets it out slowly.

“First, tell me what the fuck you’re doing here.”

“None of your—”

“It’s my brother’s house, and you’re not on the guest list.” He lifts a toned shoulder. “Pretty sure that makes it my business.”

“Maybe I was upset that I wasn’t invited,” I mutter.

Val pouts. “Aww, don’t get pissy, gorgeous. I’m sure your invitation just got lost in the mail.”

He winks and blows me an air kiss. My shoulders stiffen and my mouth twists.

“I’m not gay.”

I don’t mean to say it, but it just falls out, like a defense mechanism.

Val smirks. “Okay?”

“I’m not.”

“Yeah, I *said* okay.”

“So get off me, motherfucker,” I spit.

His grin widens. “Hold up, do you think I’m pinning you to the ground right now as a *foreplay* thing?”

You have a sickness. A corruption. Something that needs to be cut out of you…

“You’re flirting with me. It needs to stop.”

He snorts, shaking his head. “Fuck me. If *this* is your idea of flirting, where have you been all my—”

“*Val*,” I snap.

“Mmm, yeah, say my name, gorgeous.”

I lash out, coiling my muscles and shoving him *hard*. But just as I get an arm free, he's grabbing that wrist again and shoving it back down, where it was before. We've shifted so that he's further up my torso now, sitting on my sternum, his body folded as he leans down close to my face.

"*Bad boy*," he murmurs quietly.

That fucking zapping sensation picks up speed, pulsing and flickering like wildfire or lightning through my body as I grit my teeth.

He shifts, and another sound escapes my mouth.

"And that?" he purrs.

"You're…" I can actually feel my lungs squeezing this time. "*You're choking me*."

"Kinky," he murmurs. He doesn't move. He doesn't even blink. He just looks down at me with a mix of predatory hunger and dark curiosity.

For a hot second, I wonder if I've *massively* misjudged this guy. I mean, I obviously have, dismissing him as Evelina's little ballet buddy for the last few years when clearly he's a lot more than that, not to mention much stronger than I ever dreamed.

But suddenly, I'm also wondering if I've missed the fact that Val Bancroft could well be a fucking psycho. Because right now, he's looking at me like he can't decide if he wants to try to kill me or possible flay me open to see what's inside…

…Or maybe do something else.

No.

"Val…"

With a slow sigh, he gradually sits up a little, easing his weight off my sternum and allowing my chest to rise with my breath again. But before I can get used to it, or hope it means he's getting up, he starts to slide lower.

His knees stay on either side of my body as he slides down, pushing them down my ribs and then my hips. He never lets go of my wrists, and

suddenly he’s basically lying on top of me, pinning me down with his bulk, still keeping my arms on the ground.

We’re barely inches apart.

Eye to eye.

His languid, casual pulse beating against my jangling, galloping one.

“You’ve got *gorgeous* eyes, by the way,” Val murmurs.

My chest seizes up.

“Gunmetal gray, with flecks of gold,” he adds, his brow furrowing as he looks deeply into my eyes, barely five inches from his own.

The air hums around me. Heat from his body radiates into mine. I swallow when one of his fingers casually strokes the pulse point on my wrist.

Then I feel something else.

Something hot.

Something throbbing.

Something…*big*.

The realization slams over me like a bucket of ice water, sucking the air from my lungs as the voices inside me come screaming to the surface and snarling in my ears.

You have a sickness. A corruption. Something that needs to be cut out of you…

He’s…*hard*.

Fucking hell.

I tense as Val’s eyes pierce mine. Wildness flickers in them, and I feel his body flatten even more against me. I bite back a groan, feeling his muscles coil. And when I feel the thing I refuse to acknowledge press against me, the zapping sensation starts to go haywire.

Adrenaline explodes through my system. Every muscle in my body tenses and clenches, and I bite down hard enough on my lip that I taste copper when he starts to *move* against me. And then—

No.

NO.

It's just raw sensation. It's…biology. Pure animal instinct.

…*That's* how I explain to myself—or *try* to—why my dick is rapidly filling with blood and swelling to thickness inside my too-tight pants.

Against *him.*

"*Val—*"

"Well, well, well," he murmurs in a dark, masculine, sultry tone that sends shivers rippling down the back of my neck. "Now what exactly is *that* big, thick fucking—"

"*I'm not gay*!"

My strength comes back to me as I blurt the words. With a grunt, I somehow shove him off and roll us both over, disentangling myself from his grip on my wrists and still refusing to acknowledge that my cock is *rock* fucking hard and twitching against his through our pants as we grapple together on the floor.

What the fucking fuck…

Without thinking, I wind up and hit him, making him grunt as I catch him across the jaw. I shove back, scrambling up and half tripping over my feet until my back hits the wall behind him.

Val grimaces and shoves himself to his feet against the wall opposite me. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, frowning at the streak of red that comes away. He spits blood onto the ground before slowly looking up at me.

That unhinged, slightly manic grin is back as he glares at me.

"That wasn't very fucking nice, Roman," he grunts.

“I—” I swallow. “Sorry,” I mutter. “But I’m *not* fucking gay.”

“You keep saying that.”

“I’m *not*,” I spit viciously.

Val glances at my crotch. “Does your dick know that?”

“*Look—*”

“No, *you* look,” he snaps, slapping my pointed finger aside and crashing into my personal space, crowding me against the wall, something new flickering in his eyes. “I don’t know what the fuck you think you’re doing here, Roman,” he hisses. “But you need to get the fuck *out*.”

I start to protest, but he shakes his head. “These are not good people,” he hisses. “Get the fuck out now, and I won’t tell my brother you were here.”

I frown. “Why would you do that?”

My breath chokes as he crowds right into my space again, his chest against mine, the heat of his body radiating against my skin, and his lips inches from mine. “*Because*,,” he growls quietly, “you’ve got a nice dick that I’d like to play with again someday.”

My whole world goes still as that zapping, twisting, throbbing sensation snakes around my heart and my very soul, and *squeezes*.

“Pretty sure he wants to play with me, too.”

He takes a step back as my entire brain function short-circuits, sparks flying everywhere as I struggle to swallow.

“I—I’m…” I shake my head, my eyes locked on his. “I’m *not* gay, Val,” I hiss.

“Yeah, well…”

That sound—that same *sound* as before—escapes my throat and tumbles pathetically over my lips when his hand cups my cock through my pants.

“Next time,” Val murmurs, winking at me, “maybe make sure you and your dick are on the same page. Now get the fuck out of here. Seriously.”

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3

VAL

WHEN I WAS ELEVEN, in one of the few foster homes that *didn't* make me want to tear off my own skin, my foster mom read me Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken".

That's the poem that starts "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood". We've all read it. But it stuck with me for *ages*.

I found myself gravitating to it a few years later, when I realized I quite liked the idea of grabbing a guy and kissing him on the mouth. I also liked the idea of doing the same thing to a girl.

Then I got older and realized I could have both.

Separately. Together. Mix and match, plug and play however you want.

At first I was confused. Liking guys made me gay, right? But what if I *also* liked girls equally?

Enter bisexuality, stage left. I'm not really a fan of labels, but goddamn I love that one, because it's me in a nutshell—and not just the sex part, or the orientation.

I don't want to trot out some clichéd shit like "there are two wolves inside me". If there's one thing I've never wanted to be, it's a cliché. I've fought my entire fucking life not to be "the orphan", or "the amnesiac", or "the queer."

But there *are* two sides to me, at times playing the same game and steering me in the same direction, and at others almost ripping me apart in their need to seek different horizons.

On the one hand, I'm fun Val. I like to party. I won't say no to a drink. I love—I mean goddamn *love*—fucking. Orgasming and coming inside a hot mouth, a tight ass, or a wet, milking pussy is just about the single greatest feeling I'm pretty sure a human being is capable of.

Well, the *second*-greatest feeling. The absolute greatest—and I'll fucking die on this hill—is dance.

Ballet, to be precise.

I don't know what it is about it. Partly, it's the precision and the rigorous discipline involved. There's also the history and tradition of it and how being a dancer makes *you* part of that history and tradition. I fucking love the way we still use pretentious French words for the steps that are ten times harder to say than "jump" or "twirl". The way the teacher stands in front of the rest of the class because it used to be King Louis IV standing there.

It matters. The history and the tradition and the discipline of it *matter*. Because they ground you to something beautiful, elegant and utterly unimportant which is yet somehow one of the most important things of all when it comes to the human condition: art, and the way that art expresses the soul. Without art, I'm not actually sure you *can* express what it is to have a soul.

Well, maybe fucking would do it. But it's a distant second to dance, in my humble opinion.

Short answer, I was lost before I found ballet. Or maybe it was ballet that found me. Add the fact that "Billy Eliot" was the only VHS tape at one of my foster homes, and the glamor of the stage, with the costumes and lights —I can be a fancy fucking bitch when I want to be—and you have the initial pull.

And the feeling I got the first time I stepped into a studio and stood at the barre?

Indescribable.

Pure. Fucking. *Peace*. A respite from the endless screaming in my head that had been filling the void my lost memories left behind since I could remember.

That's not to say that ballet changed my whole life right there on the spot. I mean, you wanna play life in hard mode? Go into the New York City foster care system as a queer kid and tell them at ten that you want to *dance ballet*.

Yeah.

But get tough or die trying, and I refused to fucking die.

Not when the other kids tried to kick my ass for being a "princess". A "ballerina". A fruit. Far worse names. Not when the foster dad at my next home told me in no uncertain terms that ballet was for girls, and that he'd be damned if he kept a sissy homo under his roof prancing around in a tutu.

Not even at the house after that, when the devil would come to my room at night.

I. Refused. To. Die.

When I got beaten up, or someone put their hands on me, I learned to fight. And when some prick asshole told me the one fucking joy I'd found in life wasn't allowed, I snuck out of the house at night and took lessons with the adult class at the church community center ten blocks away.

Ever since then, ballet has been my anchor. It's what's kept me sane and prevented me from straying too close to the darkness that swirls inside me, or the looming, jagged edges around the holes in my memory that I'll never get back.

These days, at least, I have a better understanding of those. I know now who I used to be during the time I can no longer remember. That happened several months ago, when Vaughn came into my life.

The brother I never even knew I'd lost.

He was the one who filled in some of the gaps for me, though I still can't remember them. We were born to addict parents in McKeesport,

Pennsylvania. Dad stole cars and Mom turned tricks to feed their heroin addictions. And one winter night, after they'd both disappeared for longer than usual and the house was below freezing inside, Vaughn got us both bundled up and out of that place forever. He broke into the furniture store downtown: it was heated and had warm beds, and we wouldn't be sharing with addicts or criminals.

Or so he *thought*.

But as it turned out, breaking into that store to avoid freezing to death was the moment our lives swerved from one direction to a *vastly* different one. The furniture shop was a front for a safe house belonging to a group that would change the course of our lives: the Obsidian Syndicate.

I've got mixed thoughts about what I know now happened after that. On the plus side, the Syndicate took us in. They fed us, clothed us, gave us a place to live and a family, a brotherhood, to grow up in.

That said, we worked nine hours a day packaging up drugs for distribution.

But—shit. It was better than freezing to death in McKeesport or waiting for one of mom's Johns to put his hands on us, or one of Dad's buddies to go psycho and stab us.

Then one day the police raided the warehouse where we were working. They came in guns blazing: SWAT team, armored car, the whole bit. And when I got hit hard in the head by a bouncing tear gas canister and was knocked unconscious, Vaughn made a split-second decision to give me a chance at a better life.

As our Syndicate brothers were fleeing through the back door, Vaughn, knowing I'd be found by the cops, told the men that I was dead. He even slipped his wallet into my pocket, trying to give me what little money he had in case I needed it.

Then, he was gone, along with my memory of him.

I woke up not knowing who I was, why they'd found me where they did, or anything about my past. All I knew was I had a wallet in my pocket with fifty bucks and a gym ID photo that looked like me and said my name was Vaughn.

So that’s who I was for the next twenty-ish years.

Vaughn the foster kid.

Vaughn the queer.

Vaughn the ballet dancer.

Until the *real* Vaughn came back, then second-in-command of the entire Obsidian Syndicate.

I smile wryly as I slip the cigarette between my lips and look around at the gorgeous, dimly lit study in the vast mountaintop estate. My gaze slides over the huge desk that screams power, the shelves of leather-bound first editions, and then out the enormous double-height windows that give a breathtaking moonlit view of the Adirondacks.

I shake my head with a low, quiet chuckle.

I mean, I do love my life, and the man I’ve become. But *fuck. Me.* The divide between my brother and me spans oceans. I’m a dancer who likes to party and until recently lived in a cramped, overpriced studio apartment in the West Village.

Meanwhile, my older brother is “the Marquis”: the shadowy, commanding leader of one of the most secretive and powerful criminal empires on the planet, complete with a fucking *gigantic* mountaintop castle retreat.

I mean, come on.

I exhale out of the corners of my mouth, shaking my head again as I flick the Zippo in my hand and bring the flame to the end of the cigarette.

“I believe I’ve told you that I’d prefer it if you didn’t smoke in here.”

I hesitate, the flame an inch away from the tip, lifting my gaze past it. Vaughn stands in the doorway of the study, a dark brow arched as he eyes me.

He’s only seventeen months older than me. Sometimes, even *I* have a hard time believing we’re not twins. We’ve got the same build, though I’m maybe an inch taller. Same sharp blue eyes. Same face. Hell, we even got

similar tattoos in similar places at separate times, though he’s kept his forearms and hands bare, where mine are festooned with ink.

He keeps his hair short and slicked to the side, though, which contrasts with my usual shagginess. I like mine a bit longer; Vaughn prefers looking like a European aristocrat. Like he’s just *waiting* for the first hints of silver to grace his temples so he can really lean into that sugar daddy vibe.

“*Prefer* as in *kindly do not*, or as in—”

“Val.”

I sigh. Fair enough. It’s not *my* bazillion-dollar cliffside castle-mansion, I guess.

“You know,” I say, tucking the unlit cigarette behind my ear, “I think you should take up smoking.”

Vaughn smirks as he crosses the room to the bar cart by the cinematographer’s wet dream of a view.

“That's *outstanding* advice,” he says sarcastically. “You should start a health podcast.”

I grin as I give him a middle finger. “It would really complete your whole aesthetic, is all.”

He glances my way as he pours a splash of something I’ll bet costs as much per fluid ounce as my old apartment did per month.

“My aesthetic?”

“The Bond villain crib, the elegant clothes, the mysterious title.” I shrug. “Smoking would really complete the whole vibe.”

“Well, should I ever feel the burning desire to lean into a *cancer* aesthetic, I’ll take that advice.”

“He says, pouring a glass of literal poison.”

Vaughn shoots me a look. “Would you like a drink?”

“Depends. Is it nauseatingly expensive?”

“Extremely.”

“Then yes. Obviously.”

My brother shakes his head, then pours me a glass and walks over to hand it to me.

“How do you think tonight went?”

I frown. “Is this a rhetorical question, or do you legit want my input?”

I can never quite tell with him. Sometimes, it truly does feel like Vaughn is trying to bridge the gap between us that twenty years apart created. Other times, I wonder if he feels guilty when he looks at me, knowing he left me to the foster care system while he went on to…well…*this*.

I’m not one to hold back on what I’m thinking—shocking literally no one—so I’ve point blank asked him about this, and I’ve made sure he categorically knows that I understand he did what he did twenty years ago because he truly wanted to give me a better shot at life. But he never quite answers the question—in fact, he’s hellaciously good at sidestepping it entirely whenever I bring it up.

So, like I said: I can’t quite tell.

“I’m genuinely asking,” Vaughn says, bringing the crystal tumbler in his hand to his lips and taking a slow sip.

“As my brother, or—”

As my employer.

That’s a slightly awkward aspect of our relationship that the two of us dance around. Ballet—unsurprisingly—pays *shit*. But I’ve made it work for years: I’ve bartended, walked dogs, sold weed on the side, even go-go danced in a cage at a greasy, retro-themed gay bar in the village. That gig was pretty fun, actually.

My financial situation has never really bugged me, because at the end of the day, I get to dance professionally. But since my brother re-entered my life, things have changed. And this is where the awkwardness between us comes into play.

Vaughn immediately wanted to move me into some insane penthouse apartment overlooking Central Park. But I've spent my entire life knowing with brutal clarity that nothing comes for free. Yes, that's a fucked-up way to look at a gift from your own brother, but it is what it is.

So instead, we found a middle ground. Well, sort of a middle ground.

I said no to the Central Park penthouse, but I *did* take Vaughn up on the Soho loft. It's still disgustingly expensive, but nowhere close to a billionaire's row penthouse. Also, it doesn't come for free—at my insistence.

Vaughn doesn't let me do anything *hugely* dangerous or illegal. But I do odd jobs for him and the Syndicate at times. Tonight, for example, I wasn't just here for the food. My job was to "assist with attending to some of the evening's "more select, VIP guests". Which is a nice way of saying I was babysitting the youngest daughter of Diego Torvallés, Claudia, who was coked out of her fucking *mind* all night.

The Torvallés family, as Vaughn explained to me, is one of the oldest and most powerful in the European underworld, dating back to the Spanish Inquisition. And obviously when my brother decided to throw a dinner party with Cosimo Sangrini as the guest of honor they were included on the guest list, including Claudia Torvallés and the full eight-ball of narcotics dusting her nasal cavities, whom I babysat all night.

…Well, not *all* night.

My pulse twitches and a throbbing, gnawing hunger pools low in my stomach.

Roman.

Roman, with scowling eyes and outrageously hot grunting sounds that rumble in his chest like thunder. Roman, with forearms that make me fucking drool and a jawline that makes me want to take a fucking bite out of it.

Full disclosure, I've been lusting after Evie's older brother for almost as long as I've been aware of his existence. But I wouldn't classify it as a crush or anything emo like that. I don't really *know* Roman Nikitin. I just

know he’s got a mouth that is *begging* to be wrapped around my dick and an ass that makes me hard as steel whenever we’re in the same general vicinity.

Like, I’ve never wanted to write syrupy poetry about his eyes. But I *have* jerked off to the thought of bending him over and pounding the fuck out of him.

That makes sense…right?

Tonight, though, things went further than anticipated. My attention was first caught by the guard who kept slipping into shadowy corners up on the mezzanine level and sipping from a metal flask. Red flag number one. Then I started following him with my eyes and could *not* help but wonder why his suit was practically painted onto his mouthwatering frame.

It wasn’t until I tackled him to the ground, pinned his hands above his head and saw the tattoos on the backs of his hands that it all clicked.

What can I say? Those hands and their tattoos may or may not have starred in *several* late-night fantasies of mine.

Yes, I have many questions, including “what the fuck was Roman doing here”, but that’s not the one that’s been blaring like an air raid siren in my head ever since I told him to get the fuck out.

No, that honor goes to “why the hell did touching him *ignite* something in me”. Not just lust—I know lust. This was wild, untamed, and shockingly raw.

Again, I’ve had jerk-off fantasies about the guy since the first time I laid eyes on him. He’s hot as fuck, and has that growly, surly, hyper-masculine thing going on that makes my dick *ache.*

But tonight was the first time I’ve ever seen deeper than that. Tonight felt like I peeked around a curtain I’m not sure I was meant to see behind.

But *fuck me,* I liked what I saw.

Beyond the alpha-energy, hyper-masculine sex appeal, the gruff roughness, the muscles hewn from rock, and the tough guy fuck-you attitude…

Tonight, I caught a brief glimpse of something vulnerable, soft, and breakable in that man.

And it's *done a number* on me.

Which is…concerning, for two important reasons.

One—this is, or at least *should* be, a big one—is that I don't go after straight guys. I don't do the whole "down low" crap, I don't do "I just want to experiment", and I *definitely* don't do guys who make it abundantly clear how straight they are. Except there's just one little problem with that argument in this case.

Roman Nikitin sure as *shit* ain't straight.

I mean, obviously *he* thinks he is. But I know what I heard when I had the fucker pinned to the ground.

A goddamn *whimper*.

It might have been hidden, caged behind confusion and uncertainty. But it was there. And that's not even getting into what I *felt* when slid down his body and my cock, swollen and leaking precum, throbbed against his.

…It fucking throbbed back.

Hard. Thick. And fucking *big*.

Straight guys don't get rock hard when another man pins them to the ground. They don't moan, either.

"We had company tonight."

When I hear Vaughn's voice I blink away my lurid fantasies of Roman on his knees, hands bound behind his back and my cum painted on his lips.

"What?"

"An uninvited guest," he says quietly, taking a sip of his drink and turning to look out the window at the stars over the Adirondacks.

"Oh?"

Vaughn nods. “One of our men was discovered after our guests left, tied up in a closet, missing his suit and mask. He’d been chloroformed.”

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I think I knew that I should be curious where the hell Roman got that too-tight but oh-so-hot uniform and the mask. But I was distracted by…well…*him*.

Him, and his telltale erection rubbing against mine.

“I had my people check the highway security cameras near here,” my brother continues. “We caught a few frames of a car heading back to the city with plates registered to the Nikitin family.”

My pulse skips as a whining sound fills my ears.

This would be the *second* reason it’s concerning that just one close physical encounter with Roman Nikitin has me so disjointed: his family and mine are about to be rivals in a race in which there’s only one winner.

“Did you notice anything off tonight? Anyone out of place?”

I take a moment, sipping the absurdly expensive scotch in my glass.

“Nope.”

Fucking hell, what am I doing?

“I was too busy babysitting Claudia Torvallés,” I shrug. “Who, by the way, should *probably* see someone about her drug use. That girl legitimately snorted more coke tonight than—”

“Okay, thanks,” Vaughn grunts, cutting me off. His brow furrows as he turns to me. “Nothing else? I think we almost certainly had a Nikitin spy here tonight.”

I take a long pull from my drink. “Is that a problem?”

My brother smiles coldly, his mouth twisting devilishly up at the corners. “The opposite, actually. All part of the plan. I’m just mildly curious who Pavel sent tonight.” He shrugs and turns back to the windows. “Ah well.”

For a second, I almost tell him.

But then…I don’t. And it’s not until Vaughn wishes me good night, reminds me what time his helicopter will take me back to the city in the morning, and leaves me to my thoughts in his study, that I realize that pinching sensation I’m feeling is one of being caught between my hard-on for a self-professed straight guy and loyalty to my criminal mastermind brother.

Fuck.

I don’t have the first idea what the hell to do with any of that.

But by the time I head to bed, I know one thing for sure: I *need* to find out what Roman was doing here tonight.

I swear, that’s the *only* reason he’s on my radar now.

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4

ROMAN

Absolute control. Sheer will. Power in strength.

My teeth grind as I clench my jaw, glaring into the glass of vodka in front of me.

It didn't happen. Even if it did, it wasn't my fault.

Fuck. When the ways you try to lie to yourself begin to sound, verbatim, like the narcissist's prayer, it's probably time to admit that shit has gone *south*. Badly.

So I do what I've been doing for roughly the last twenty hours: try a different tactic to absolve myself of the sins that happened in the Adirondacks.

It was simply my body's natural reaction to an external stimulus. That's all.

Pain shoots through my jaw as I grind my teeth harder.

"External stimulus." Somehow, that's the terminology I've landed on, as if making it sound clinical and scientific removes any suggestion of sexual arousal. If I can make it sound like something out of a textbook, then I can make myself believe that the blood flowing directly to my dick when that motherfucker pinned me to the floor…and *rubbed* himself against me…was simply a biological reflex.

It was dark, I've tried telling myself. *You'd had a couple of drinks.*

Fucking shoot me. This is pathetic. Worse, *it's not fucking working*.

"Rome."

My brows furrow deeper as I glare into the depths of my drink.

"*Rome*."

"Chill, dude. If he's anything like me, he's still not capable of forming sentences after last night."

"Oh, for fuck's sake. *Roman*!"

This time, the voice calling my name is accompanied by a sharp elbow to my ribs. It knocks me out of my haziness enough to focus on more than just the vodka in front of me and the black thoughts still drifting like venom through my system.

I turn to glare at Bane before he can jab me again.

"*What*?" I grunt, scowling at him.

He cocks a brow. "Nothing. Just thought you were having a fucking stroke or something."

I lift a dismissive shoulder and raise my glass to my mouth. "I was just thinking. Relax."

Across the round table from me, slumped against the dark blue velvet of the curved booth, Laz wrinkles his nose and rolls his neck wearily. "How the fuck are you able to think again yet? I can barely get a coherent thought through the dumpster fire that used to be my brain before you fuckers got to me last night."

Next to me, Bane smirks. "Keep whining like that and I'll have to confiscate your Russian card."

"Fuck, you can have it," Laz groans. "Or I'll burn it as a fuck you to the system that allowed me ever to think that it was remotely okay for a human being to consume that much vodka. It'll be my version of the bra-burning protests."

A slight smirk twists my lips. “I think Bane’s right. Keep bitching about it and you’re out of the cool club.”

“*Good,*” Laz sighs, taking a sip of the beer in front of him.

“Seriously, what are you drinking?” Bane frowns, running a tattooed hand through his hair.

“A beer?”

“At the Russian Tea Room?” Bane shakes his head ruefully. “This is a fucking disgrace.”

Laz flips him off. “It’s called hair of the dog.”

“It’s called sack up and get a real drink like an adult, you fucking goober,” Bane sighs. He turns to shoot me a look. “Can you believe this guy?”

I force a smile to my face. “In fairness, last night *did* get…” I shrug.

Ludicrous. That’s what last night got. After I drove back to the city, probably breaking every highway speed record known to man along the way, I called up these two and convinced them to come out with me.

We went *hard*, and believe me, when it's the three of us, that’s saying something.

I’m not even sure what I told them was the reason for my downright *aggressive* drinking last night. But *I* know why.

To chase the memory away.

To make myself forget.

To remind myself that I’m in charge, and not beholden to the corruption that swirls inside me.

The irony that I drink to what most people would call “excess” to stay in control isn’t lost on me. But last night, that’s exactly what it was: a necessary measure to wrest power back from whatever darkness inside me was allowed to take over back at the house.

With *him*.

Val.

I flinch as I knock back the rest of my glass and reach for the bottle in the middle of the table.

I've barely stopped drinking since last night. I can’t.

Because when I start to slow down, I start to remember the way that fucker pinned me down. Worse, the way I didn’t fight it.

I’ve tried to convince myself that I *couldn’t*. I mean, yes, he was a lot fucking stronger than I ever imagined he’d be. But still, it was only half Val's arm strength.

The other half was that a part of me…a part that I have gone to insane lengths *never* to acknowledge, even to myself…made itself far too known last night.

I’ve been trying to drown it with alcohol ever since.

“Hey, speaking of bras.” I quickly change the subject, if only to stop my thoughts from spiraling and my memories from lingering too long on strong, veined, tattooed forearms. On dark hair, heavy brows, a chiseled jawline, and piercing blue eyes…

I toss back another huge gulp of vodka and then level a look at Laz.

“How’d things go with that girl you were all wrapped up in last night?”

A wicked smirk crosses his lips. “A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell.”

“Please. You trying to convince anyone that you’re in any way, shape or form a *gentleman* is pure fucking comedy,” Bane grunts.

Laz flips him off.

“What about you, Antonov?” I grin at Bane. “I saw that chick hanging all over you at that last place.” My brow furrows.

At least, I think I did.

Laz snorts. “Him? *Nope*. Didn’t you hear?”

“Shut the fuck up, Laz,” Bane growls, shooting our friend a dark look.

“Hear what?” I perk up.

“*Nothing*,” Bane hisses.

Laz rolls his eyes, then sighs and turns his attention to me, “Our boy here—”

“I’m warning you, shut the *fuck* up, Kislev,” Bane says tightly.

“—has a little crush,” Laz finishes, blowing a dramatic air kiss toward a scowling Bane.

I grin as I turn to him. “On?”

“Really,” he mutters. “It’s *nothing*.”

“And by ‘nothing’,” Laz chimes in, “he means ‘blurring the lines between a crush and stalking’ as far as he can—*yo, chill, motherfucker!*” He squawks the last part, ducking to the side to avoid Bane’s fist as he leans across the table and throws a wild punch.

“Okay, okay, peace,” I growl. “Seriously. Shake hands.”

“Should we kiss and make up, Antonov?” Laz grins.

Bane rolls his eyes. “Switching teams?”

“*Fuck* no,” Laz chuckles. “Can you imagine doing a dude?”

A tightness forms in my throat, but I swallow it back along with a mouthful of vodka.

Laz shakes his head. “I obviously don’t mean that in a phobic way. But pussy is just too fucking *sweet*.” He turns his attention back to me as I force my expression to stay neutral. “Speaking of…what happened with that girl you walked out of the place with?”

I got halfway home with her, realized I had zero goddamn interest in fucking her, had the cab drop me off in front of a bodega that would sell me a six-pack at five in the morning, and sent her home.

“She had a boyfriend,” I shrug, leaning back against the cushion behind me with a shrug. “A serious one.”

Laz frowns. “Yeah, one she *seriously forgot about* while she was sitting in your lap slobbering all over your neck all night. Pretty rude of her,” he sighs. “Wasting your time like that.”

Bane rolls his eyes. “A woman isn’t obliged to fuck you just because you bought her a few drinks and offered her a ride.”

Laz flips him off. “You know that’s not what I mean. I’m just saying, our boy here has a limited window of opportunity to introduce his dick to new vaginas before he’s shackled to just one for the rest of his life.”

Bane frowns as he glances my way. “I genuinely keep forgetting about the whole you-getting-married thing.”

“Yeah, can we talk about *literally* anything else,” I mutter under my breath.

“Oh, come on,” Laz winks. “I don’t know why you’re so bent out of shape—”

“Are *you* marrying a woman you don’t know for the sake of your family empire, Kislev?”

“*Fuck* no.” He makes a face. “I mean, can you imagine?”

Bane gives him a look. “Yeah, dipshit, I would imagine *the guy getting married for the sake of his family empire* HAS, in fact, imagined it.”

“Well,” Laz shrugs, “she seemed nice enough at that dinner party your father threw for her family and yours last month.”

Bane frowns. “Did you even talk to her?”

Laz shrugs his shoulders. “No. But even from a distance, I could tell she had a *great* personality.”

Laz cups his hands out in front of himself, as if he’s holding two basketballs to his chest.

“Great, *huge* personality…”

Bane snickers and I roll my eyes. “You’re a fucking idiot.”

“*Mouthwatering* personality,” Laz continues.

“Meh, Roman’s not a boob guy,“ Bane sighs.

Laz makes a face. “Lucky for him, his arranged bride-to-be has the infrastructure to turn the *dead* into boob guys.”

The two of them start to go at it again. But just then, my phone lights up on the table in front of me.

STEPAN

Your father wants to speak with you. I’m waiting outside.

I frown at the screen for a minute.

STEPAN

Yeah, still outside.

I debate turning the phone face down and continuing my mission to drink myself into oblivion, but then it lights up again.

STEPAN

Don’t ignore me, Roman. I’ll come in to get you and embarrass you in front of your friends.

I allow a grin to creep into the corners of my mouth as I throw back the last of my drink and stand.

“Gotta run, boys.”

Bane’s brow furrows as he looks up at me. “Papa Nikitin?”

“Yup. When he says jump…”

“You better fucking ask ‘how high’!” Bane and Laz crow at the same time, demonstrating that they have spent *far* too much time around my father.

I give them both a fist bump and head outside to where Stepan is waiting behind the wheel of his all-black ‘69 Mustang Mach 1—AKA “his baby”. At forty-two and single, I’m guessing this car really is going to be his one and only baby.

My father’s number two, who's always been like a strict if protective uncle to me, eyes me as I fold my large frame into his muscle car. “How drunk are you?”

I swat at the mini Manchester United F.C. soccer cleats perennially hanging from his rearview mirror as I turn to him. “Not very?”

Stepan rolls his eyes. “Have you ever considered the concept of moderation?”

“Have you ever considered buying a car from this millennium?”

“Nope. Buckle your seat belt.”

“Wow. This ancient thing *has* them?”

Stepan’s only response is to peel away from the curb so fast that I almost fall out of my seat.

Well played, sir.

* * *

“YOU LOOK LIKE SHIT.”

I think I was nine when I gave up hoping my father would speak to me like I imagined at the time that fathers spoke to their children. He was never going to ask me how my day was, or if he could help me with anything, or if there was anything I wanted to talk about.

At all.

Evie gets a *bit* of his softer side, being the princess of the family and all. But even she doesn't usually hold her breath waiting for a hug or a smile.

It’s just not in our father’s DNA—never has been, never will. But I suppose it’s that coldness and gruffness that’s got him to the head of one of the most powerful Bratva families on Earth, even commanding a seat at the Iron Table.

You don’t get there asking people how their day was, or if they want to talk about their fee-fees.

“Sorry, Papa,” I say as I meet him halfway across the floor of his study. He gives me a stiff, brief hug—not to show affection, but because this is how a man like him is *supposed to* greet his son and heir.

When we pull apart, his brow furrows and his nose wrinkles.

“You smell like a bar.”

“Apologies, Papa,” I mutter as we take seats across from each other on the two couches facing each other in the middle of the study. “I…had some business to discuss with the owners of a club.”

Behind him, Stepan rolls his eyes, but my father just nods. “Good. *Good*. My son, out there on the streets, getting things done and building his future.” He leers at me. “And having a little fun, too, eh?”

I smile. “I do my best.”

He chuckles. “I hear you were spotted at Laz Kislev’s club last night with a pretty little thing on your lap.” His mouth curls into a lascivious grin. “I assume that’s what kept you from filling me in on what you discovered at Vaughn Bancroft’s estate?”

My right eye twitches as I force a smile to my face.

“Guilty as charged.”

He laughs deeply. “Just like his Papa, hey, Stepan?” My father glances at his number two, chuckling. “Get us some drinks, *da*? For you as well. Let’s talk business.”

Stepan pours three vodkas at the bar across the room before joining us at the couches and sitting next to my father.

“*Za zdorovye*,” the three of us grunt as we clink our glasses together.

“Stepan already showed me the pictures you took that you emailed him.” Papa nods at me as he takes a sip. “I want to know what else you saw and heard there. I want the full breakdown of your night. Leave no details out.”

I knock back the contents of my glass in one gulp.

He’s not getting the full breakdown. And there will be *several* details left out.

“Our intel was right,” I growl. “Vaughn and the Syndicate are trying to cozy up to Cosimo.”

“*Ublyudok!*” Papa swears under his breath. “I knew that sneaky motherfucker would try to undermine our plans.”

For the record, they’re *his* plans, not mine—i.e., my impending arranged marriage to Dasha Lukashova.

Laz’s crude jokes aside, Dasha’s a *very* pretty girl. She’s also intelligent, driven, and is clearly as unenthusiastic about this disastrous arrangement as I am. But my father’s push for me to marry her isn’t about either of our enthusiasm levels.

It’s about the Lukashov Bratva being close with the Sangrini family—so close, in fact, that Cosimo Sangrini is Dasha’s godfather.

That is what my father is ultimately after: access to the underworld banker king himself.

The Sangrini family hasn’t remained an underworld institution and basically kingmakers since the fucking Crusades by playing petty favoritism games. Their whole thing is remaining utterly neutral.

But no man, not even Cosimo Sangrini, is above all influence. And his weak spot is Dasha.

Cosimo has no children of his own, which means his goddaughter has become a bit of a favorite of his. Thus, he who controls the princess, controls the purse strings, so to speak.

But here’s where it gets extra spicy: until a few months ago, the Lukashov family was eying someone other than me to marry Dasha: *Vaughn Bancroft*.

At the time, he was the Obsidian Syndicate’s number two, second only to the previous Marquis, who I’m sure also realized that a Dasha was an expressway into Cosimo’s good graces.

But then said preceding Marquis, a man named Étienne Veyrac, was… *removed* from power. And it's been *heavily* implied that this change in leadership was entirely put into play by Vaughn himself.

At that point, the Lukashov family pulled back and announced they'd be looking elsewhere when it came to a husband for their dear Dasha.

That's when my father set things up with me, and it's one thousand percent why Vaughn invited Cosimo to his mountain retreat for dinner last night.

There are criminal empires, and then there are *criminal fucking empires*. Families like mine, or Bane's, or the Barone, Drakos or Kildare families are powerful in their own right.

But there's another level to this game that even huge empires like ours don't come close to touching: dynastic seats of power that have been around for *centuries*. The d'Auvrelles of France. The Torvallés family in Spain. The founding families of the Italian Camorra.

That's the prize here: get in Cosimo's good graces, and doors that don't open for *anyone* magically unlock for you.

"Cosimo attended Vaughn's little soiree last night," Stepan growls, "because he's a man who enjoys parties and being the center of attention." He shakes his head. "It takes more than flattery and fawning to get into the good graces of the Sangrini family. Vaughn should know that."

"I think he *does* know that," I mutter. "He invited him anyway. That says something."

My father scowls as he slowly shakes his head. "Vaughn is a formidable opponent. Thank God his brother's a fucking queer."

My attention snaps to him as I blink rapidly. "What?"

"Vaughn's brother," my father shrugs. "You know, the little pansy who dances with your sister."

For some reason, my brow starts furrowing and my jaw tenses. The black, venomous snake coils in my stomach as I swallow the lump in my throat.

“Vaughn on his own is bad enough,” my father scoffs. “Imagine if his brother was a real man.”

For a second, I’m frozen in place as I stare at my father.

A real man.

Instantly, my mind flashes back to Vaughn's party two nights ago. To the sensation of being utterly and completely pinned down. Of having my control and my strength taken away from me. Of feeling totally immobilized by the sheer power in those muscled arms and big, veined hands…

“We should push Lukashov to accelerate the wedding plans,” Papa growls, his attention swiveling to Stepan. “Set up a meeting.”

“*Da*, *pakhan.*” Stepan nods curtly back, pulling out his phone and tapping quickly on the screen.

My father clears his throat as he turns back to me. “I know you don’t want this marriage, Roman.”

I don't say anything.

“I know you’d rather be out and about like you were last night, with pretty girls you meet at bars warming your bed. But this marriage…” He shakes his head. “This is what kings do, my son.”

I nod stiffly. “Of course, Papa.”

He grins. “Plus, it’s not like I’m marrying you off to some troll, eh?” He shakes his head and chuckles. “The *tits* on that girl…”

Bane’s right: I’ve never really been a boob guy. But *fuck me*, where my future wife is concerned, everyone else seems to be.

* * *

“ROMAN!”

Behind the frosted shower door, Evie shrieks as I flush the toilet in her ensuite bathroom.

“Such a dick!”

I chuckle deeply before calmly filling the water glass at the sink with cold water. Then I proceed to dump it over the top of the shower stall onto my sister, who immediately squeals again.

“*C’mon*, Roman!!”

I grin. “Just wanted to say hi before I took off.”

“Don’t go yet!” she calls back. “I’ll be out in a sec!”

“Cool. I’ll be in your room.”

As much as I enjoy teasing her, I fuckin’ *love* my little sister. We have a great relationship, we can tell each other everything, and I am *fiercely* protective of her—maybe a little too much. That’s partly because I’m seven years older than her, and partly because Evie is…well, *sheltered* isn’t maybe the strong enough word to use.

That said, she’s also quite possibly the sweetest, kindest, gentlest, most honest person I’ve ever known.

I step back into her room and close the door to the bathroom behind me while she finishes up in the shower. A smirk plays over my lips as I take in her bedroom.

I’ve always joked that Evelina is the little princess of the family. But *fucking hell* does she lean into it well.

Pink.

“Pink” is how you would sum up my sister’s entire personality in one word. Not neon in-your-face pink. Not spoiled-brat Barbie pink.

Princess pink.

And by “princess”, I mean a singing, dancing, talks-to-cute-forest-animals Disney princess.

Her bedroom is a total extension of that. It’s pink, obviously, complete with a four-poster, gauze-draped princess bed, a huge, high-backed chair in her reading nook, shelves and shelves of books, pink and white gauzy drapes, and a pink fluffy throw rug.

Yet somehow, the whole setup looks wholesome and cozy, not sickly sweet and headache or diabetes-inducing.

Being seven years older, I moved out of this house a long time ago—first to attend Knightsblood University with Laz and Bane, where I also met and became close friends with Carmine and Nico Barone and Nero De Luca, then to my own place in midtown after I graduated.

Evelina would typically have also gone to Knightsblood too. It's kinda where you go when your family is mafia royalty. But when she got into the Zakharova Ballet due to her *exceptional* talent, not even Papa could say no.

I’ve tried putting a bug in her ear about moving out—I mean, she *is* twenty-one. She could even move in with me if the idea of living on her own didn’t appeal. But she always deflects the question.

Honestly, I think she *likes* staying here and sleeping in the same bedroom she’s slept in her whole life, even if it does mean sharing a house with our father. And it’s not like living under this roof puts any cramps in her dating life.

She doesn’t have one.

Part of me wishes I could claim that my “scary big brother” energy sends the boys running for the hills. But it’s not me. It’s her being at times almost disturbingly innocent about the world mixed with what I’m pretty sure is a complete disinterest in dating. Or maybe she’s just an old-fashioned girl waiting for Prince Charming to sweep her off her feet.

In the meantime, though? No complaints here. It saves me the trouble of having to murder any fuckhead who hurts her, and I certainly sleep better at night knowing she’s not trying to navigate the creeps, weirdos, and predators of New York City.

While I wait for her to finish her shower, I cross the room and slump down into her high-backed reading chair in the corner, little string lights framing

the shelves and shelves of books.

My brows knit as I look down at my hands and pick idly at a cuticle.

Tell her. Just fucking tell her.

My sister and I are close. We can, and often do, tell each other anything and everything. Well, not *everything*, I guess. But lately, as the storm inside me has become harder to ignore, and as the weakness in me has grown… I've started to wonder about talking to her about it.

Maybe.

I don't know.

I exhale. I don't even have the words to describe that…*thing* inside me. The *thing* I can normally bury down deep and ignore so well, but which came roaring back from the shadows with a vengeance last night.

…When *he* pinned me down.

When he touched me.

When I felt the heat of his body and the throb of his—

I grimace.

What the fuck is wrong with you?

Yeah, there's no way I can talk to anyone about this. Not even Evie.

Instead, I exhale deeply and try to change my mind's focus. I glance over at the end table beside the chair and grin as my brows raise.

My my my, Evelina Nikitin…

I snort as I pick up the paperback with the black and white shot of a shirtless hunk on the cover. He's giving a look that either means he wants to fuck you, or else is holding in a fart. Can't quite tell.

But the book promises "out of control spice", "CNC dark romance at its finest"—whatever the fuck that means—and has a sticker proudly proclaiming "Best of Booktok" on it.

I grin, trying to come up with the best possible way to let it slip to my sister that I've just discovered her taste in romance books, when her phone near the book lights up, catching my attention.

It's unlocked and open to website that I don't recognize…or is it an app? The screen blinks again, followed by a soft chime.

I know I shouldn't. It's none of my business. But, I mean, prying into your kid sister's private life is *kinda* a big brother's job, right?

For a second, when I pick up the phone, I'm not sure what I'm looking at. The page says "Club Venom" at the top, with a logo of a coiled red viper. Beneath that, two little icons are illuminated, with text next to them.

Member Status: Signed In.

Profile: Active.

I start to scroll down, and my jaw goes tight as a wire.

What the…

For a second, I thought this might be some new dance club or something. But as my eyes scan the page, I realize Club Venom isn't a bar.

…It's a fucking *sex club*.

One that caters in particular to "darker, more taboo kinks" and then lists shit like "BDSM, power-play, impact play, sensory deprivation, bondage, D/s," and more.

What the fuck are primal play and CNC?

The screen dings again with that little soft chime. My gaze jumps to the top corner of the screen, where there's now a blinking speech bubble icon and the words "new DM."

This is *really* where I should put down the fucking phone, forget everything I saw, and go drink until I can pretend this never happened.

I don't.

Instead, I click on the DM icon, and a message thread pops up between “HeartofDarkness” and “PrincessBabyxoxo”.

My blood turns to ice as I start to read.

HEARTOFDARKNESS

I’m free tonight.

PRINCESSBABYXOXO

OK. I can be too.

HEARTOFDARKNESS

Can, or fucking WILL.

PRINCESSBABYXOXO

Will. Sorry.

PRINCESSBABYXOXO

Sir.

Red mist clouds my vision as I stare open-mouthed at the screen. My brain can’t quite accept that my baby sister is having this conversation with someone.

HEARTOFDARKNESS

To be clear, when we meet, per your request, I’m going to be rough. I’m going to pin you to the ground, tie you up, and fuck you like the slut you are.

I almost hurl the phone through the fucking wall. Pure, animalistic *rage* explodes through my system, seeing this motherfucker call my sister that.

Correction: this *dead* motherfucker.

HEARTOFDARKNESS

Your safe word is fire. Don’t forget it.

PRINCESSBABYXOXO

I won’t, I promise.

PRINCESSBABYXOXO

I’m so excited for this!

HEARTOFDARKNESS

Meet me here. Nine pm. Don’t forget the mask.

The dead motherfucker's sent her an address with a map pin to some goddamn state park about half an hour north of the city.

He wants *my fucking sister* to meet him, at night, in the fucking woods, so he can…?!

My eyes squeeze tightly shut as my hands ball to iron fists.

My evening plans have just changed, to *murder*.

I pull out my phone and take a picture of Evie's screen, saving the address. Then I send a message back, as her.

PRINCESSBABYXOXO

I'll be there.

Then I delete the conversation, block the dead motherfucker, and navigate to her user profile. In the privacy submenu there's a switch that toggles between "profile: public and searchable" and "profile: hidden".

I switch it from "public and searchable" to "hidden".

Pure wrath rages through my veins as I stand from chair and cross the room to the bathroom. The water is off when I rap my knuckles against the door.

"Evie."

"Hey!" she calls back from the other side. "Gimme a minute to—"

"I gotta run. Something came up."

Something as in straight-up murdering the dead motherfucker you've been insane enough to be talking to on the internet, who you were going to fucking MEET in the goddamn woods.

Like I said, Evelina is maybe a little *too* innocent for this world. Too trusting. Too *good*. That's why I've always been such an overprotective brother: to make sure creeps like *this* asshole stay the fuck away from her.

Seems I've let myself slip a little bit. Tonight, I'll be fixing that.

"Aww, c'mon! Just one sec!"

But I can’t. Not just because I have to go bury someone in a shallow grave after I hack off their dick. After what I just read, I’m not sure I can even look my sister in the eye again.

What the actual fuck *were you doing on that site, Evelina?*

“Sorry!” I call through the door. “I really have to go. We’ll catch up soon.”

Evie groans. “*Fiiiine*. You owe me, though.”

At some point, she and I are going to have a *very* serious chat about all this.

But for now…

It’s murder time.

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5

ROMAN

THE MERCEDES SUV rumbles to a stop, crunching over the gravel. I shift into park, glancing through the windows at the deserted parking lot of the state park.

This fucking creep may have managed to convince my sister to meet him *here* so he could do whatever he wanted to her without witnesses or anyone coming to her rescue.

But his insidious plan is going to be his fucking downfall. Because it’s not sweet Evie's screams that will go unheard tonight.

It’s *his*.

And I *will* be making this fucking lowlife predator scream.

…And scream, and scream, and *scream*.

I switch the car off and step out into the slightly foggy chill of the night air. Summer is gone, and I can taste fall in the air as I pull a mask out of the pocket of my leather jacket.

It’s not to hide my identity. Before I kill this fucker, he will know who I am. It's for maximum terror factor in the moment he realizes he didn’t lure a poor, innocent girl into the woods.

He invited a fucking monster. And I’m going to destroy him.

The headlights darken behind me, and the whole scenes dims to the thin, silvery glow of the moon filtering through the mist and the trees. The first fallen leaves of the season are brittle underfoot as I put the mask on and slowly head down the trail that leads from the parking lot.

My eyes shift side to side and my muscles tighten up as I try to sense anything that might give away this asshole's location.

I'm going to find you, motherfucker. And then I'm going to make you scream, beg, and bleed for trying to lure my poor sister out here to—

The guy comes out of nowhere.

He slams into me from behind and grunts as he knocks me to my knees. I snarl when he wraps a sinewy arm around my throat and forces me face-down onto the ground, making me choke on dust and leaves.

The breath rushes out of me in a whoosh as his firm, powerful body lands on top of mine, pinning me to the earth as he grabs my wrists and shoves my hands over my head.

No.

What the fucking FUCK.

It's not just surprise that has me shaken and unnerved. It's not just the sudden shift from being the hunter to being the hunted.

It's happening.

Again.

Same as last night, when Val had me on my back, my hands pinned and my strength and control utterly wrestled away from me.

Heat.

A throb.

A twitch.

An ache deep inside that suddenly has my dick thickening in my jeans.

NO.

That zapping sensation is back, making my throat close up and my pulse skip as the man breathes against the side of my neck, right by my ear, sending shivers and sparks and untamed viciousness coiling through my very soul.

“You are *full* of surprises, Princessbaby,” he purrs seductively into my ear.

My pulse jumps erratically. My skin erupts into electrified goosebumps.

“I was expecting a girl,” he murmurs near the shell of my ear. “But…”

This time, he doesn’t just breathe against my ear.

He fucking *bites it*.

His teeth clamp down on the lobe, sending a wicked bolt shooting through my body and directly to my cock. I groan into the dirt as my dick swells rock-hard against the ground, twitching and throbbing, precum leaking into my boxers.

That’s when I feel it: hard, hot, and fucking *huge*, grinding against my ass.

His *erection*.

“Lucky for both of us, I can be *flexible*,” he growls. “And you smell fucking *delicious*.”

One of his hands slides from my wrist, slipping up my forearm and over my bicep and shoulder before his fingers snake over my scalp. He grabs the short hairs and tugs, and before I can stop myself, a gurgled, achy, needy sound tumbles from my mouth.

“I’m going to enjoy feeling those little fucking whimpers around my dick while I’m fucking your mouth, Princessbaby.”

Something in me snaps: a final, desperate last-ditch effort to prove to myself that this isn’t me. That I don’t want this. That I’m not harder than I’ve ever been as this stranger grinds his huge erection against my ass.

With a grunt, I throw my arm back, jamming my elbow into him, hard. The man groans, and his grip on my hair loosens a bit.

It’s enough.

I snarl as I slam my elbow back again, catching soft flesh this time. He loses his grip on me, and when his weight shifts, I use my momentum to kick up off the ground.

He tumbles away from me as I lurch to my feet. I whirl, a feral snarl on my lips as I turn the tables and slam into him. My hands wrap around his neck as I sweep his legs, catching him off-guard and knocking him off his feet.

We both hit the ground with a grunt—him on his back, me on top of him with my hands around his throat.

“Oh, you *kinky little fucker*,” he groans, and I swear, his cock actually throbs even harder against mine as he says it. And when it does?

Fuck. Me.

The feel of his need, pulsing so hot and raw and urgent against me is… confusing. World-shattering.

But empowering. And fucking *hot*, in a way I’ve never felt before.

His dick twitches against mine again, and sheer horror washes over me as I feel my cock thickening to fucking steel against his.

“*That’s* it, baby,” he groans, rocking his hips against me. “Let me feel how fucking hard that big, fat dick gets for me.”

My breath stutters. My body turns numb, and my head goes into stunned shock as he starts to thrust against me. His erection grinds and rubs against mine through our jeans, the friction driving me fucking wild.

My eyes roll back, my breath choking off in my tightening throat as pure, unfiltered desire explodes through my system.

…Which is why I’m completely unprepared when he suddenly flips us over and pins me to the ground, with *him* on top.

“*Fuuuck*,” he groans savagely as he rubs his bulge against mine. “*Fuck*, are you hard,” he hisses.

I can’t talk. Can’t say a word. Can’t even fucking *think*. My whole world shrinks to the outrageously good feeling charging through my dick and balls as he pins my arms to the ground and slides his fat, swollen erection over mine.

What the fucking shit is this?

“Shit, baby,” he grunts. “You’re making me so goddamn hard with that big fucking dick.”

I see it coming before it happens. And yet, somehow, I’m powerless to stop it. He's looming over me, our eyes locked through the masks we’re both wearing—he in a Venetian devil mask that covers the top half of his face, me in a black balaclava that covers all of mine.

But then his face slowly lowers to mine. His hand releases one of my wrists, and in slow motion, it reaches for the edge of my ski mask.

No.

Please.

Don’t see me. Don’t see my secret darkness.

And just as my eyes drop to the swirls of tattoo ink peeking out from the collar of his hoodie, his fingers grab the edge of my mask.

No—

Too late. With a flick of the wrist, he’s yanked the mask from my face, exposing me.

…His whole body goes still, and his sharp blue eyes widen behind his mask.

“*Roman*?!”

The entire world stops for a second. Because the moment my name leaves his lips, it all clicks horrifically into place.

Somehow, I break the ice that’s kept me frozen in place, jerk my hand up, and rip off his mask.

Val doesn’t even blink as we stare at each other.

Still inches apart.

Still panting, our legs entangled.

Both of us still *rock fucking hard*, our dicks twitching against each other as time stops moving.

“What the *FUCK*, man!” Val scrambles up and away from me, and I do *not* have the time or bandwidth to deal with the disappointment that spikes through me when he does so.

He stumbles away from me as I lurch to my feet, breathing heavily, my face pale as we stare at each other in the moonlight.

“What the *fuck*!” Val blurts again.

I swallow, my body trembling, my pulse roaring in my ears as I stare at him with haggard horror.

“I—I’m…” I angrily force the quiver from my voice. “I’m straight!!” I roar.

Val bristles, his nostrils flaring, his chiseled jaw working, and those fucking piercing blue eyes slicing into my soul.

“What the *fuck* is this,” he hisses through clenched teeth. “Some fucking setup?”

“I'm straight. I’m not—”

“*I know!* Jesus!!” he barks back.

My breath comes in short, staccato chokes, my chest rising and falling rapidly. Val whirls, shoving his hands through his hair and swearing into the darkness of the forest around us. He turns suddenly, his eyes stabbing back into me.

“What the fuck are you doing here?!”

My jaw clenches. “Who did you think you were meeting?”

“Some chick!” he spits back.

“*Who*,” I snarl.

“*I* don’t know! That was sort of the whole fucking *point*, dimwit!!”

The screaming DEFCON alarms in my head lower a notch.

“You…didn’t know who you were meeting.”

“*Obviously* not!” he roars.

“I mean, when you thought you were meeting a girl—”

“The whole point of anonymous stranger sex, in case you’re mystified by the concept,” he hisses, “is that it’s, you know, *an anonymous fucking stranger*!”

The alarm level lowers another notch in my head.

He didn’t realize he was meeting Evie.

“You know, I *knew* you weren’t straight,” he spits. “But I did *not* have ‘roleplay as a girl on my Roman Nikitin bingo card, you catfishing motherfucker!” he grunts.

“*Fuck you*,” I hurl back. “And for the record, I *am* straight—”

His harsh laugh rips through the night and shreds me to pieces.

“Holy fucking *denial*.”

My lips purse tight as I glare at him. “Fuck you. I’m leaving.”

“Fine,” Val snaps back. “Hey, on your way out of the woods, see if you can manage to find your way out of the fucking closet while you’re at it.”

I whirl, surging into him and grabbing him by the front of his hoodie with a furious snarl on my lips.

“Let’s try this one last fucking time,” I seethe. “I am *NOT GAY*.”

Val’s mouth tightens to a line. His chiseled jaw grinds, and his blue eyes glint into mine like icicles.

“Whatever you fucking say, asshole.”

I grip his hoodie a little tighter before I suddenly shove him back and jab a finger at him. “Stay the fuck away from me and mine.”

“The fuck does that mean?”

“It means stay away from me!” I bark, a tremor rattling in my voice.

Stay in control.

Power in strength.

Be a fucking man.

Val sneers at me. “Hey, I’m not the one who came to the woods looking to get *fucked*, sweetheart.”

I shove down the throb of heated shame that curls low in my stomach when he says it. Then I grit my teeth and glare at him.

“Fuck you.”

I turn abruptly, my heart racing like an F1 engine, my skin tingling all over.

“Roman.”

I stutter to a stop and half turn back toward him. His eyes cut through the misty, moonlit night, ensnaring me.

“Not gay, huh?”

I swallow heavily.

“Not even a little,” I mutter, my voice shaking.

Val smirks. “Well, next time, make sure your big, hard dick gets the memo, yeah?”

I peel out of the parking lot in spray of gravel and dust. I only make it about two miles down the road before I pull into a dark turnaround.

It takes all of four strokes before my cum is spilling over my cock and my hand, my cries choking into the stillness of the car as the black sickness inside me consumes me whole.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

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6

VAL

THE ITCH WON'T GO AWAY.

It's lurking inside me—a gnawing, incessant hunger twisting and pulling at every fiber of my being.

And it's *fucking with me*. Distracting me. Bleeding into every waking thought.

A few days ago, I was a block away from my apartment enroute to rehearsal before I realized I'd left my dance bag behind. You know, that twenty-odd-pound thing that I've lugged from home to class every day for the last seventeen years of my life. How do you not notice that.

I put *salt* in my coffee the other day, for fuck's sake.

Worse, the itch has been knocking me off my game in rehearsal, to the point that Madame Kuzmina is screaming for my fucking blood and barking at me like the Stalin-era prison guard she so obviously wishes she was.

This distraction has a name.

Roman. Fucking. Nikitin.

Someone I would typically vote for as Straightest Straight Dude of the Year. President of the We Only Fuck Pussies Club. Allstar captain of Team Hetero.

…But that was before I pinned him to the ground and felt his cock pulsing against mine. Before that goddamn *whimper* escaped his stubbled throat.

Before he met me in the woods—having pretended to be a *girl* online for some insane reason, though yours truly isn't complaining—and groaned when I bit his ear, ground my dick against his gorgeous, tight ass, and breathed against his neck while he desperately humped his erection against mine.

And fuck *me*, that erection.

Roman is fucking *packing*. I won't lie, half my distractedness the last few days has been entirely due to that fucking cock of his throbbing and pulsing its way through my thoughts on the daily.

I'm almost exclusively a top. But that doesn't mean I don't get turned the *fuck* on by a guy with a fat dick I can stroke and tease while I pound his ass.

"*Dude*."

For an insane half second, I worry that Brooklyn has learned how to read minds, and is thoroughly disturbed by the images she's just peeked in on involving me, Roman, some thick rope, and a ball gag.

Then I realize it's not telepathy that has her jaw dropping. It's the apartment I've just let her into.

My new apartment.

I make a face, sliding my hand through the back of my hair.

"Yeah. It's…a little much, isn't it."

Brooklyn blinks as she walks further into the massive Soho loft I've been calling home for the last month. I haven't brought anyone else here yet, mainly because I knew I'd have no fucking idea how to react to…well… reactions like hers.

It's probably the same reaction *I'd* have if she suddenly showed me a brand-new multimillion-dollar living situation.

Actually, there's no "probably" about it. I literally *did* have this reaction when she first brought me over to her and Kir's insanely huge mansion in the Bronx.

I mean, the girl was living out of her goddamn *car* before that. Talk about an upgrade.

Brooklyn and I come from similar backgrounds. We both had shit parents, "did time" in the New York state foster care system, and struggled to survive while pursuing ballet as a career.

So for us to be where we are now—her in Kir's literal Vanderbilt mansion in the Bronx, me in a trendy loft big enough to host a runway fashion show—is…surreal.

"I mean, it's *gorgeous*…" she breathes, gazing at the double-height beamed ceilings, massive factory windows, and stunning wide-plank wooden floors.

"…But a little much, right?"

She smirks, tucking a strand of blonde behind her ear as she turns to me, her brow arched. "Do you *want* it to be a little much?"

I frown. "Meaning?"

"Meaning that you, having spent most of your life fighting for survival in shitty homes, are having a hard time processing the idea that life is finally not going to be so difficult for you. And because of that, you feel a sensation somewhat akin to guilt, which you assuage by self-sabotaging your own happiness and safety."

I blink, staring at her as she grins at me.

"Did you…practice that?"

Brooklyn giggles. "Fuck you."

"No, that was *solid*. You know, if ballet doesn't pan out, and if this whole soulmates-with-a-smoking-hot-gazillionaire-Bratva-leader thing falls through—"

I smirk when Brooklyn holds up both middle fingers.

“I’m just saying… Therapist might be a decent career path.”

She rolls her eyes. “Talk about the blind leading the blind there.”

I laugh deeply.

“No, seriously, this place is *beautiful*, Val. Just don’t forget to allow yourself to believe you deserve it, okay?”

“I’ll do my best,” I shrug. “Hey—what are you doing tonight? What do you say to chilling here at my glamorous new digs, ordering pizza, popping some bubbles and watching dumb movies?” I smirk. “Provided BDE doesn’t get all alpha possessive about it, of course.”

Brooklyn blushes deeply. “Can we *please* just call him ‘Kir’?”

Before they became a thing, “BDE” was Brooklyn's and my codename for Kir—AKA, Big Dick Energy.

I mean, if the man could bottle his vibe and sell it, he’d be even *more* of a gazillionaire.

“Why?” I grin. “Does me mentioning your older boyfriend’s huge dick make you uncomfortable?”

She groans, flushing redder. “How about we just let *me* think about Kir’s dick?”

I sigh. “If you insist.”

“I do. And for the record, Kir would be totally fine with me hanging for pizza, bubbles, and movies.”

I frown. “This better not be some fucking queer-equals-feminine bullshit.”

She rolls her eyes. “No, it’s some ‘Kir and I are completely secure in our relationship and trust either other implicitly’ bullshit, if you must know.”

She sighs and punches me in the chest playfully when I close my eyes and fake a dramatic snore.

“Laugh away, *asshat*,” she grins. “Maybe you’d know what I meant if you were capable of having a relationship that lasted longer than two hours.”

I have my fucking reasons.

But she doesn't, and doesn't need to, know that.

"Hey, I have had several *extremely* long-term relationships," I say with mock indignation. "Some even lasted *days*."

Brooklyn giggles and shakes her head. "You're ridiculous."

"Don't make me return you."

We both laugh. That's our inside "foster kid" joke.

"Anyway, I'd love to hang out tonight, but I can't. Kir and I have a thing."

I smirk. "Another fundraising gala for elephants?"

She grins and flips me off again. "That was last week. No, it's a fancy ball Evie's dad is throwing. I guess like a pre-engagement celebration for Roman?"

The smile evaporates from my face.

"What?"

Brooklyn frowns. "Don't you remember? Roman's marrying some Bratva princess to secure a mafia alliance thing." She shrugs. "I dunno. Those arranged marriages seem batshit crazy to me. But I doubt Roman cares. I mean she's gorgeous, and the girl has a *rack* on her."

A vicious, violent, and snarling sensation that I don't quite understand and definitely never saw coming steamrolls through me.

What. The. *Fuck*.

I've had enough questions since that night in the woods. Like why Roman was cosplaying as a chick on the Club Venom app. And why, once we actually met, he went all psycho and started screaming about being hetero, when he was hard enough to burst.

But this is a brand-fucking-new one.

Somehow, in the whirlwind of figuring out my relationship with my brother, moving house, and the daily chaos of ballet, I *did*, in fact, forget Evelina saying that her grouchy-hot older brother was getting engaged to some Bratva chick.

But the big question isn't "why did I forget about that".

…It's "why the fuck does it piss me off so much, and why do I feel like someone is taking something *that belongs to me*".

Why the fuck do I feel so goddamn possessive about him?

"That's tonight?"

Brooklyn nods. "Yeah. So, sorry, I'll be sipping bubbly with a slightly fancier crowd." She winks at me. "No offense."

"None taken," I say lightly, the wheels starting to turn. "This thing is fancy?"

She nods. "Black tie. Why?"

Don't.

Stop it.

It's not that I'm crazy—not in the diagnosable sense. It's just that sometimes…

Okay, fuck it, I'll go full cliché after all.

Sometimes, it *does* feel like there are two wolves inside me. One is normal Val, who smiles at people on the street, expresses himself through dance, and holds doors for little old ladies. The other is a god of hedonism, chaos, and vice. Furthermore, at times, those opposing forces will…argue with each other.

Loudly.

Like right now.

One side—the "good" side—is telling me to fucking leave it be. Roman is clearly confused, and *obviously* has issues that he needs to work through

before he marries some poor girl who—I assume—wants a heterosexual husband, babies, all that shit.

But the other side is…not shutting the fuck up.

That side, the side that's feeling a possessiveness I have no fucking right to feel, starts scheming.

And in the end, that's the side that wins out.

"Oh, no reason," I smile at Brooklyn. "Unrelated question: is Evie bringing anyone to this shindig?"

* * *

SPOILER: Evie wasn't. But she is now.

I know this is probably crossing a line. At the very least, it's involving myself in something I shouldn't. Roman's issues are his own. And however fucking hot it was to tackle him to the ground in the woods and feel his big cock get all hot and hard for me, and however much he turns me on… showing up to his fucking *engagement* party is a supremely shitty decision.

And yet, here we are.

Evelina's father's house is *always* dripping with luxury and power. But tonight, they've gone all out. Limos, supercars, and armored SUVs form a line outside the front gates, and armed, violent-looking motherfuckers with earpieces and scowls scan the rooftops and quietly size everyone up as they file in.

Two of the fuckers glare at me as I make my way up the front steps, a shit-eating grin on my face.

"*No,*" one of them growls in a thick Russian accent. "Turn around, now."

I have no idea what the guy's name is, but we've met. I've been to Evie's house like a million times.

He clearly doesn't give a shit about that.

I clear my throat and flash an even wider grin. “I think you’ll find that I’m on the guest list. I’m Ms. Nikitin’s date for the evening.”

I show them my ID. The familiar-looking guy glares at it, then glances down at the tablet in his hand sourly and nods to his buddy.

“All good, Mr. Bancroft. Please enjoy your evening.”

I smile broadly as I adjust my bowtie and strut past them, shoving the voice screaming “no straight boys” into a box and slamming the lid down.

“Oh, I *plan on it*.”

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7

ROMAN

THE PROBLEM with power and wealth is that it’s never enough.

That sounds awful, but as someone who’s been born and rigorously raised to be a king of both… It’s the ugly truth.

Those with money *always* want more. Power is even worse. They're like drugs—two proverbial dragons that addicts are forever chasing.

Wanting.

Consuming.

Needing, until everything else falls by the wayside.

My father—unsurprisingly—is a prime example of this. Our family is *ludicrously* wealthy. Not rich. Not well-off. I mean *wealthy*, in the royal sense of the word. Evie and I could quit everything today—never work, lift a finger, or even invest—and our great-grandchildren would be able to do the same.

The same goes for power. Paval Nikitin helms one of the most far-reaching, entrenched Bratva empires in the world. Other hugely powerful Bratva families *bow* to the Nikitin name. We even sit at the Iron Table, one of the two presiding bodies in the Bratva world. It's kind of like being a country on the United Nations security council.

And yet, even with all that power and grotesque wealth, is my father satisfied?

Nope.

And his drive for “more” isn’t ambition, either.

It’s fucking greed. It’s a sickness.

Which is how we arrived at tonight.

Around me, the crowd of allies, sycophants, and hangers-on smile, drink and glad-hand my father. They’re congratulating me, too, with clinked glasses, heavy claps on the back, and firm embraces.

I’m barely aware of any of it.

Partly, it’s because I’ve been drinking like it’s my sole mission in life for the last several hours. I mean, obviously I have. It’s the only possible way I’m going to get through this shitshow. The other reason is that this fucking “event” is making this whole damn marriage thing *much* more real, and I’m suddenly realizing exactly how unprepared for it I am.

But there’s also a third reason for my dazed, automaton dance through the crowd of well-wishers, one that’s got me on edge even more than the prospect of an arranged marriage I have no interest in.

You have a sickness inside you.

A corruption.

A darkness that I keep firmly locked up behind walls and bars.

Or, should I say, *kept*. Past tense.

Because a few nights ago, in the woods, with strong, veined hands pinning me down and a deep, masculine voice growling in my ear and sending electricity zapping down my spine, I failed to keep that corruption at bay.

Horribly. Spectacularly.

And it’s been fucking haunting me ever since, day and night.

I want to hate myself for the way I gave in. The way all my strength and power and control just fucking *vanished* when that voice growled into my ear.

And then *bit* it.

You smell fucking delicious.

A heated shudder ripples through me, sparking a tingle in the lobe of my ear where his teeth sank into me.

I hate how fucking weak I was. That I didn't fight him.

But I know even that is a shitty attempt at trying to paint myself as a victim of an unwanted situation. It wasn't that I "didn't fight back" or "let it happen".

Cold, hard truth: I need that to be the case because it absolves me.

…Of wanting it. Of feeling my blood turn to liquid fire when he touched me and held me down, taking away all my carefully laid out and painstakingly arranged power. Of needing—fucking *needing*—more when he ground his hot, hard thickness against mine…

"*There* you are."

I blink, faltering as the feminine voice pulls me back to reality. I clear my throat, forcing myself to swallow the lump in my throat.

Dasha Lukashova, AKA my fiancée, smiles at me, her brows cocked in amusement.

"There's my lovely husband-to-be," she beams as she presses against my chest, looks up at me with stars in her eyes, and stretches up as if to kiss my cheek.

Instead, she hisses in my ear.

"*For fuck's sake, Roman, get it together. You look like you're at an execution—your own, at that. Fix yourself. Now.*"

She pulls back, and she's all pleasant smiles and doting looks again.

Fuck, she's good at this. Really, really fucking good at it. But it's also not her first arranged marriage engagement party.

It's her *fourth*.

Before me, it was Vaughn Bancroft, which is cartoonishly, disturbingly ironic given that it's his fucking *brother* I can't shake from my goddamn subconscious. Before Vaughn, it was another Bratva heir from a St. Petersburg family I don't know, and before *that*, it was some Italian mafia kid.

Honestly, I feel bad for her. She's obviously a pawn in her father's political games. Worse, she's painfully aware of it.

The real problem is, Dasha Lukashova isn't the ditzy, shopping-spree Bratva bimbo you might assume. It would be a lot easier for her if she *were*. But she's the opposite—intelligent, calculating, and politically savvy.

She might not be happy about marrying yours truly, but she understands how mafia politics work and knows how to play her part to a T—much better than I do, to be honest.

It would be so much simpler if I could force myself to *want* to marry her. I mean, the woman is gorgeous, with stunning Eastern European looks, long, runway-model legs, big blue eyes, and plush, feminine lips.

And legit *stacked*. But, I really haven't ever been a boob guy.

Dasha smiles a perfectly white, dazzling smile as one of the hired photographers homes in on us to get a few shots of her in her shimmering silver Dolce gown as she presses against my side and laces her fingers through mine.

The cameraman nods his thanks and keeps moving through the party. Dasha turns back to me and leans in for another "kiss"—by which I mean, mutters in my ear.

"*Roman, whatever is putting that pissy look on your face, you need to get rid of it. Our fathers are walking over. Find your balls, give them a little tug, and match my efforts.*"

I do feel bad for her. She's actually—well, I won't say "nice". She's mostly been frosty to me. But I attribute that to the fact that she's being forced to marry me and bear my children, like it or not.

In another situation, though, I think I'd really enjoy getting drunk with her.

I bring my glass to my lips as our fathers approach. Dasha calmly reaches up and pulls my hand back down. "*And slow the fuck down,*" she mutters through a stunning smile. "Papa!"

Bogdan Lukashov smiles broadly at his daughter as he scoops her into a big hug. My father nods his chin at me, then turns to level an obvious look at Dasha's cleavage.

"Look at us, Pavel," Bogdan chuckles, flashing a vodka-fueled grin at my father. "From the young ruffians we were back in Moscow to this: two old men watching their children marry."

My father claps Bogdan heavily on the back. "We'll be grandfathers in no time, my old friend." He turns to shake his vodka glass at Dasha and me. "Just as soon as these two consummate this thing and have some babies!"

I swear I can *feel* the sourness radiating off Dasha as I bite back a grimace and a scowl ripples behind my face.

Same, lady. Fucking same.

And that sentiment has *nothing* to do with whatever the fuck happened the other night in the woods.

Because I'm fucking *straight*.

"Miss?" A tall, handsome but surly man with an earpiece, wearing a dark suit and with his long hair pulled back, suddenly materializes beside Dasha. "You wanted me to alert you when your friend Ilana arrived?"

Dasha's eyes light up, and I can feel her sourness abating as she turns to smile cordially at the man.

"Indeed. Thank you, Lev."

"Right this way, miss."

He gives me a perfunctory nod, then bows stiffly to Bogdan and my father before he escorts Dasha away, weaving through the crowded ballroom.

"Lev is my Dasha's personal bodyguard," Bogdan explains as he knocks back his drink. "Extremely loyal."

He and my father start talking about “the good old days” in Moscow. I finish my drink, lift the empty glass to them by way of explanation, and then start threading my way through the crowd toward the bar.

“Having fun yet?”

I smirk, rolling my eyes and turning when I hear my sister’s voice.

“Loads, obviously,” I say dryly.

“Ooo, that was good,” she giggles. “I almost didn’t completely *not* believe you that time. You’ve been practicing!”

I level a withering look at her but then allow myself to smile. “You look beautiful.”

She grins. “Why *thank you*, brother of mine.” She does a little twirl, letting her—of course—pink dress fan around her like—again, of course—a fairytale princess. “It’s not too much?”

“It’s perfect.”

She beams. “Thanks, Roman. You clean up pretty good yourself, you know.”

I lift a shoulder.

“What does your *fiancée* think about how handsome you look?” she giggles.

I glare at her. “You’re enjoying this *far* too much for someone who’s going to be shoehorned into an arranged marriage with some creepy mouth-breathing heir within the next two years, my friend.”

She makes a face. “Not happening.”

I laugh. “*Sure*.”

She sticks out her tongue and brings a flute of champagne to her lips. Before she can take a sip, I pluck it from her grasp.

“*Hey*!”

“What number is this?”

She sighs dramatically. “Seriously?”

“Evie, you get shitfaced on half a beer,” I grin.

“That’s only my second glass,” she huffs. “And I’ve barely touched it.”

“How about a little moderation.”

She bursts out laughing. “Pot, meet kettle. Rome, are you serious right now?”

“Ha-ha,” I mutter darkly, keeping her flute and taking a big gulp from it.

Evie gives me a pouty look. “Fine. Be a jerk. I’ll just get my date to grab me another glass. *Some* of us actually want to have *fun* at this—”

“I’m sorry, what?” I growl, my eyes narrowing. “*Date*?”

“Me, date. You, Roman. Where Tarzan?”

It's deliberately extra gruff and cartoony, but there’s no mistaking the voice behind me.

…Because that fucking voice has taken up permanent residence in my head since it growled filth into my ear the other night.

In the woods.

As the owner of the voice held me down and rolled his hips against mine.

But right now, I’m not actually thinking about the war I’ve been having with myself regarding that voice, and those hands, and the man to whom they belong. I’m not thinking while simultaneously trying *not* to think about the way his touch sent electricity sparking through every dark, secret corner of my being, or how mortifyingly *hard* I got that night.

I’m only thinking one thing: that the motherfucker who sent those fucking messages to my goddamn sister, and called her a little slut, and wanted to *meet her in the fucking woods* that night, is *Val*.

…And currently standing in front of me, as said sister’s fucking *date*.

No, I’m not reminding myself how straight I am right now. I’m debating ripping his fucking head off.

Evie slips around me and cozies right up to Val, making pure murder explode through my veins.

“Val was sweet enough to cancel his plans tonight to help fend off all Dad’s creepy friends trying to offer me marriage to their sons. Wasn’t that nice of—”

“I’m getting another drink,” I grit out through clenched teeth. My eyes narrow dangerously on the motherfucker standing next to my sister. “Why don’t you *come with me*.”

Val’s brows lift. “I…think I could do that?”

“Don’t be long,” Evie groans, looking around. “The sharks are circling.”

Fury emanates from me like toxic radiation as I all but shove my way through the crowd. I can feel the fucker following me as I reach the other end of the ballroom and then stalk down a hallway, away from the festivities.

“I think the bar is back—”

Val grunts as I suddenly whirl, grab him by the throat, and shoulder my way into the library. I yank him after me, slamming the door shut. Shadows and moonlight glint across my snarling face as I shove him backward into a shelf, bristling with rage as I close my other hand to a fist.

“What the—”

“What the *fuck* is your game, motherfucker?!” I snarl, teeth clenched, hand tight around his throat, fist raised.

Val just smiles, arching a brow. “Well, you’re sure shaping up to be a fun—”

I tug him forward and then slam him against the books at his back.

“With *Evie*, you fuck!”

A look of utter confusion spreads across his face, his smile dropping. “What?”

My eyes burn into his. “Stay the fuck away from my goddamn sister, or so help me God, I’ll—”

“What the *fuck* are you talking about!?” he hisses back. “Evie is my *friend*.”

I bark a laugh. “Try again, motherfucker.”

His brow furrows even deeper. “Roman, I genuinely have no idea what you’re talking about. But if you’re insinuating that I’m trying to *get* with your sister…” He makes a face. “*No*, man. Jesus Christ, *no*.”

Something stills in me. And slowly, it clicks into place.

Fuck.

Ever since I saw that message on Evie’s phone, I’ve been looking at this whole situation as Val actively trying to creep on my sister.

…But maybe I’ve been missing the forest for the trees.

They were using screen names. I’ve gone back since then and looked up Club Venom, and it’s apparently an ultra-exclusive, members-only kink club that only recently expanded into an online matching service.

…And the *whole point* of the club is anonymity.

My body tenses up, my hand still wrapped around Val’s throat.

Shit.

The odds are insane. But what if…*what fucking if*…he was on there anonymously, and my sister was too? And they happened to match without knowing who the other one was?

Fuck. Fuck. FUCKITY FUCK.

“Well?!” Val snaps, his eyes narrowing.

I may have gotten *way* ahead of myself here.

My hand drops from his throat, and my fist lowers.

“Never mind,” I growl, turning to step back toward the door.

“Yeah, no, we’re not fucking done here *at all.*”

One second, I’m walking to the door. The next, a strong hand is grabbing my shoulder and yanking me back so roughly I almost fly off my feet. I grunt as my body hit the bookshelves hard, the breath rushing out of my lungs as Val cages me against the bookcase, his hands planted firmly on either side of my head.

My pulse jackhammers wildly. My throat closes off. His scent—cedar, leather, and sage—fills my senses and pulls a trigger inside me, dragging me right back to the night when he had me on the ground and breathed into my ear.

“What the *fuck* would make you think that after being friends with her for three years I’d suddenly be romantically interested in your sister?”

I swallow tightly, gritting my jaw. “Nothing. My mistake. Let me go.”

Val barks a laugh. “You’re the one who dragged me in here like you were ready to start a war, motherfucker. You’re not leaving until I get an answer.”

I narrow my eyes. “Let’s just drop it.”

“Let’s not and say we didn’t.” A shiver ripples up my spine as he closes the distance between us, his chest pressed to mine, his face inches away.

I grind my teeth together for a second.

Fuck it.

“You’re—you're on the Club Venom app,” I growl.

Val makes a face “*Duh*, asshole. So are you, cosplaying as a fucking girl for some weird—”

“I’m not.”

He rolls his eyes. “Yeah, whatever you—”

“I mean it. I’m not on that fucking app.”

He stares at me. “Did you get punched in the head? Or is this selective amnesia concerning your raging hard-on the other night when I had you on the ground in the woods? Because for the record, memory loss is no fucking joke—”

“Look, I realize now it was all anonymous. But you weren’t messaging with me,” I snap. “You were messaging my *sister*.”

The room goes still as Val freezes. Slowly, his brow furrows deeper and deeper, and then his mouth starts to turn down at the corners.

“*FUCK*!”

I flinch as Val roars and whirls away from me, yanking his arms from either side of my head and shoving his fingers through his dark hair.

“Fucking FUCK!” He suddenly bends at the middle and makes a gagging sound. “Jesus fucking *fuck*…”

After a moment, Val shakes his head and stands up, his face pale as he angrily shoves his fingers through his shaggy hair again.

“What the *fuck* was *Evie* doing on that site?!”

I shake my head. “Not a fucking clue.”

“*God*.” His eyes squeeze shut. “She’s like a sister to me!”

“Yeah, well, she *is* my sister,” I snarl.

“So…” Val’s face twists in disgust as he turns to look at me. “So that’s why you were in the woods… You wanted to beat the fuck out of whoever…” He makes a face and gags. “I’m going to be fucking sick. *Fuck*.”

“You and me both,” I grunt.

He collects himself, throwing his head back and drawing in a deep breath. He fishes inside his pocket, pulls out a pack of American Spirits, and slips one between his lips.

“The fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“It’s this or hurl, man.”

I yank the cigarette from his lips and throw it in the general direction of the trashcan. “Then puke, asshole. You’re not smoking in here.”

He glares at me and dramatically rolls his eyes. Then he turns, raking his fingers through his hair again before he glances back at me.

“So *that’s* why you were there.”

“*Obviously*,” I mutter.

“Not because you were curious.”

I swallow heavily, my brow creasing. “*No*.”

“But are you?”

That same electric tingle from before creeps up my spine as Val slowly turns to look at me, the silvery glow of the moonlight illuminating half his face and giving him a devilish visage.

“Am I what?”

He cocks a brow, his mouth turning slightly up at the corners. “*Curious*,” he murmurs.

I don’t answer. I just turn my back on him and start toward the door. Then I gasp when he grabs me viciously from behind, spinning me around and slamming me back against the bookshelves.

“The *fuck* are you—”

“I think you are,” Val growls, his blue eyes glinting, shadows etched across his chiseled jaw. “The way you squirmed and moaned when I took control…”

A hum begins in my head—pulsing, twisting, arresting my every thought. My throat works, desperately trying to swallow. And why the *fuck* is my skin tingling and prickling like I’m getting a sunburn?

“I—I didn’t *moan*—”

“*Yeah, you did*,” he growls as his body sinks against mine, his body pressing on me as his fists go to either side of my head.

My muscles tighten. My pulse thrums and skips. And…oh God…my dick starts to get hard.

Really, *really* fucking hard.

I shake my head quickly, planting my hands on Val's chest and shoving. "Get the fuck away from me," I hiss.

But he doesn't move. And honestly? My shove is weak as hell.

What the fuck is happening.

"I…I'm not *gay*," I choke quietly, blinking rapidly against the unbroken blue glint of his eyes.

He lifts a shoulder. "Neither am I."

"I mean I *don't* fuck guys."

A smug grin tugs at his lips.

"Who says *you'd* be doing the fucking?"

My pulse skips violently as heat crawls over my skin.

"I met your *girlfriend* out there," Val drawls, his voice smoky and rough, sending sparks igniting through my senses.

"*Fiancée*," I somehow blurt back. "I mean…almost fiancée. We're not officially—"

"Yeah, I don't give a fuck."

My heart races as he growls the words right in my personal space, his cedarwood, sage, and leather scent filling my nostrils.

He lets his hands drop. But he doesn't move back a single inch from where his chest is pressed to mine.

"Lotta chemistry there between you two," he says dryly. He smirks as his hands come to cup in front of his chest. "*Tons* of chemistry," he smirks.

"I'm surprised you even noticed," I mumble.

“Yeah, what part of *bi* are you not getting, man?”

I smirk. “Any hole's a hole, huh?”

“Your words,” he grins salaciously. Then he frowns. “To be honest, though, that sorta makes me sound like a whore.”

“Aren’t you?” I toss back. “Seems all I hear about you from Evie is how many fuck buddies you have.”

Val rolls his eyes. “And you’re out there living a chaste life, Roman?”

I flash a cocky grin. “I’m young, rich, and single. I do just fine.”

Val smirks. “Yeah? You fuck a lotta girls?”

I lift my shoulder. “Like I said, I do—”

One minute I’m *not* allowing a whimper—a fucking *whimper*—to escape my throat.

The next, I *am*.

I shiver, biting back the fucking sound as he leans toward my neck, his breath teasing over my earlobe as my eyes fall shut. His body grinds to mine, our hard, coiled muscles shifting against each other. His hips roll, pushing against me, and *fuck me*, I feel it.

His cock.

Rock hard, swollen, and jumping against my own.

“Sounds like you’re compensating for something,” he growls. “And from what I felt the other day…”

He groans as he rubs his erection against my dick, which is thickening at a mortifying, terrifying rate. I bite back another groan as my cock instantly swells to full arousal, electric sensations rippling and exploding through every synapse in my head as his bulge grinds against mine through our tuxedo pants.

“And what I’m feeling *now*…”

I shiver when he fucking winks at me.

“Well, it’s not the usual thing guys compensate for, is it? So,” he purrs, leaning back into my neck to let the words tease over my skin. “*Now* I’m just a little curious what. It. *Is*—”

“You *need* to get the hell away from me!” I spit coldly, my voice rising as I somehow find the willpower to shove violently at his chest. This time, either because I truly mean it or because I caught him off-guard, he stumbles a step back from me, the noose-like grip of his gaze uncoiling from around my throat before he fixes me with a look.

“And *you* need to get your shit figured out and be honest with yourself,” he snaps.

I shove past him in a dazed blur, my footsteps staggering and uneven, my pulse racing wildly as I lurch for the door.

This time, he doesn’t stop me.

When I get to it, I pause for a second, my vision swimming. I draw in a shaky breath as I turn back to him. “I need to get back to my fiancée.”

Val smirks, folding his arms across his broad chest, a smug smirk spreading across his perfect lips as he leans against the bookshelves.

“Better make sure that hard-on goes down first.”

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8

VAL

THIS. Fucking. Guy.

The three words repeat through my head over and over as I stalk Roman.

…Okay, that's unnecessarily harsh. I'm not *stalking* the fucker. We're hanging out, it's just that we're hanging out roughly twenty to thirty feet away from each other, and Roman doesn't *know* we're hanging out.

That's his problem, though.

I'm not entirely sure why I've been doing this off and on for the last few days. It started the day after that debacle of an "engagement" party, where Roman manhandled me in a way that got my blood *roaring* and my dick begging for some fun.

…Which he promptly blue-balled me on. *Such* an asshole.

After he stormed out of the library, I got my shit together, told my cock to sit down and be quiet, smoothed down my tux, and went to introduce myself to the blushing bride-to-be.

What can I say, there's a devious little fucker inside me.

I wanted to feel a sense of smugness when I looked Dasha Lukashova in the eye and smiled politely during our conversation, knowing full well that I'd just felt her fiancé's big cock twitching and throbbing against my own.

But whatever fucked-up sense of superiority I was hoping to exact from that exchange never materialized. Mainly because I actually *liked* talking to her.

It turns out, as much of a stuck-up, no-fun, closeted prick-tease Roman is, his fake fiancée is a *peach*. She's cool, intelligent, cultured, and—surprise—a huge fan of the ballet. So my plans for covertly face-rubbing quickly morphed into me offering to give her a tour of the Mercury Theatre, where the Zakharova rehearses and performs.

And I started taking my pent-up wrath out on Roman instead, in the form of stalking him.

Or, you know, whatever we're calling it.

Non-consensual distanced hangouts.

That works.

By now, I've started to get a decent feel for his schedule, which, it will shock no one, considering his delicious muscles, involves a heavy dose of gym time. I've followed him to Equilibrium, a *very* exclusive, ludicrously expensive gym in midtown four days in a row now. And that's put a damper on our "hangout" time, since they don't let non-members past the lobby.

…But as of today, that'll no longer be a problem.

I already have access to a fantastic gym at the Mercury. But what the hell—I decided to treat myself to a membership here. I mean, there's even a steam room.

I linger in the lobby after Roman swipes his card and heads in, giving him enough time to change and stash his shit in the locker room before he hits the weights. Then I do the same.

The nice thing about Roman's preferred time slot at the gym is that there's basically no one here this early. The finance bro's, I assume, come either on their lunch or after work, and the trophy wives are still sleeping. So the free weights area is *wide open*.

"Need a spotter?"

Roman about shits himself—and almost drops the insanely loaded barbell he's benching—when I walk up and lean down right in his face.

"What the *fuck*?!" he sputters, his face reddening as he grunts and shoves his arms up, re-racking the barbell before moving to a sitting position on the bench. He glares at me. "The fuck are you doing here?!"

"Working out," I shrug innocently. "What are *you* doing—"

"I'm a member," he mutters, glaring at me.

"What a crazy coincidence. Me too!" I flash him a grin as I roll my shoulders and stretch my arms, letting the tank top ride up over my abs. "So, you need a spotter or what?"

Roman's dark brows knit, his mouth thin, the picture of un-amusement.

"This is a very exclusive gym."

I snort. "Well, look at you, you fucking classist. I didn't peg you for such a bougie bitch."

His face darkens. "Don't call me that."

"Bougie?"

"Bitch."

I shrug. "Stop acting like one, then."

Roman stands abruptly, his fists clenched. "If you're looking to get hit in the mouth, why don't you just say so."

I grin at him. "Don't tempt me with a good time, baby."

He shakes his head slowly, scowling. "Are you fucking insane? Like, legit question: are you?"

"Would it be super corny if I said *you* make me insane?"

He rolls his eyes. "No. Just obnoxious, and a waste of your time."

Ahh, so we're still barking up *that* tree.

“Whatever game you’re playing,” Roman mutters as he sits down again on the bench, lies back, and positions himself under the barbell, “I want out of it. Now fuck off before I call Security.”

I sigh. “I’m a *member*, asshole.”

He ignores me, positioning his hands on the bar and lifting it from the rack. He lowers it to his chest with a grunt, and I immediately move into a spotter position, standing near his head, my hands hovering just under the bar in case he needs it.

“I don’t need your fucking help,” he grunts as he starts to bench the bar up and down.

“Maybe I just like the view. You lying between my legs, looking up at me like that…”

Roman turns beet red, his eyes widening a little before they pull to murderous slits. “Seriously, get the fuck away from me.”

“Why?”

Roman grits his teeth, his muscles flexing and bulging in a way that *does things* to me as he shoves the bar up from his chest. “Because you’re…”

He trails off, and I chuckle.

“Oh c’mon, where’s that homophobia? Let it out, buddy.”

Roman grunts again as he lifts the bar from his chest. “I wasn’t going to say *gay*, idiot.”

“Good. That’s not my label of choice.”

Roman grunts extra loud, making my dick twitch as he shoves the bar all the way up and re-racks it. He sits up, wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand, his broad chest heaving as he swivels to look at me.

“Why do you insist on intruding into my life?”

“Because it’s just so much fun?”

His too-perfect mouth twists. “I’m *not into men*. Period. I’m not sure how much clearer I have to be. I’m—”

“Do *not* say straight, please,” I groan. “I honestly can’t hear it again and not laugh. Or throw up. Or both.”

Roman’s stubbled jaw tightens. “*Look*. Whatever this fucking banter-y bullshit of yours is, I’m *not* interested. Full fucking stop. I’m marrying a woman, in case you missed it.”

“*Ahhh*, yes,” I sigh. “The beard. How terribly cliché—”

“Fuck. *Off*.”

Roman turns away from me, lies back on the bench, and slides under the bar again. He un-racks it and lowers it to his chest, grunting with the effort. Just as he starts to lift, I put my hands on top of the bar and push down—not hard, just enough to make it impossible for him to fight it.

His eyes go wide. “What the *fuck* are you doing?!”

“I want some honesty, Roman.”

“Val, get the *fuck* off!”

“If you’re not into guys…” I sigh. “Exactly what got your cock so fucking *hard* the other day.”

He grunts, gritting his teeth as he tries to shove up against both me and gravity. “*Fuck. Off*.”

“Throbbing, even…”

“I swear to fucking God—”

“Leaking precum all over your underwear…”

“GET OFF!” he roars.

“Mm, love it when you get bossy.”

With a roar, Roman takes matters into his own hands. He doesn’t have weight locks on the bar, so he rolls to the side, lowering one end of it.

Instantly, the plates on that side fall off and hit the floor with a sharp metallic clang. The bar then immediately tips to the other side, and the other plates do the same thing.

Okay, well played.

Roman now shoves the empty bar up easily, sliding out from underneath it and lurching to his feet.

“The *fuck* is your fucking problem?!” he roars, slamming into me and shoving me back with his palms.

“Everything all right, gentlemen?”

I blink, and we both turn to see some douche-y fucker who looks like a trainer standing there, sporting an Equilibrium t-shirt and employee badge.

I smile at him. “No problem here at all.”

“Actually, there is,” Roman growls. “*He*”—he jabs his thumb at me—“isn’t a member.”

The trainer turns to me. I grin and pull my shiny new ID card out of my gym shorts pocket.

“Just joined.”

The guy frowns and pulls out his phone, holding the camera to the QR code on the front of my card. The phone dings and a little green checkmark blinks on the screen before he smiles warmly at me. “Ah! Well, welcome to Equilibrium, Mr. Bancroft!”

“*You’ve gotta be kidding*,” Roman mutters under his breath. He turns to the trainer. “Nolan, thank you, but I’d like some space, and *Mr. Bancroft* here is making that impossible.”

“Nolan” turns to me with an apologetic smile. “So sorry, Mr. Bancroft, but it would appear Mr. Nikitin would like a bit more time on the bench press?”

Or to lie to himself.

“Yeah, I think I’m fucking done here anyway,” I mutter, turning away. “Enjoy the bench, dickhead. See if you can turn that denial into fuel.”

Anger clouds my face as I storm into the locker room.

Fucking asshole.

I know I can be a little much…okay, *a lot* much. But for fuck's sake.

I know—and *Roman* knows—how he's responded every time we've crashed together. Those little fucking whimpers, and the *not* little, at all, erection that rises to say hello every time we're in the same room together.

Coming to terms with your sexuality is complicated. I *get* that. But Jesus Christ. We're well into the twenty-first century. This isn't the goddamn forties, and that motherfucker is *obviously* into men.

Obviously into *me*, to be exact. Not to toot my own horn.

And this constant…not just *denial*, but the way he shoves that denial in my face, as if I'm somehow *imagining* his huge fucking erection and subby little whimpers when I touch him…is getting insulting.

I exhale the fury from my lungs as I drop my forehead to the lockers.

This guy is making a mess of me, and I don't understand *why*. I also don't understand why I don't just walk away from this train wreck of a closet case. Whether he figures his shit out or not, it's none of my fucking business. It shouldn't be taking up so much space in my brain and my life.

He's…wreckage.

And I have no time for that.

I strip off my shorts and tank top and wrap a towel around my hips before I storm over to the steam room. This membership cost a small fortune, and if I didn't get a chance to actually work out, you can be damn sure I'll at least enjoy the amenities while I'm here.

The steam room is hot as fuck when I step in. I groan, already feeling the tension releasing from my muscles as I roll my neck, turn the heat up a bit, and settle onto the wooden bench along the far wall with a deep sigh.

…Which is exactly when the door slams open, and Roman comes barging in like a Miley Cyrus's "Wrecking Ball".

He freezes in the doorway, and I can't hold back my smirk when his gaze drops to my muscled, tattooed chest, and then to my grooved, inked abs.

His throat bobs as he swallows, just…staring at my bare torso as his mouth drops open just a little.

I arch a brow. "*Is*…this what I hope it is?"

He blinks, the stunned gaze disappearing as he quickly yanks his eyes up to mine. His face darkens as he scowls deeply. "You need to *Fuck. OFF*."

I scowl right back. "Hey, asshole, I already *did*. You got your precious bench press time. I was comfortably relaxing in here when you—"

My mouth snaps shut when Roman surges across the steam room, getting right in my space. I roll my neck as he comes to a stop inches away.

"The other night wasn't what you think," he hisses. "*I* am not what you think. So get the *fuck* away from me!" His finger jabs my bare chest, hard. "And *stay* there!"

He turns abruptly and starts for the door.

"Stop being so fucking bossy and grouchy and moody, then," I snap.

Roman he whirls back on me. "*Excuse me?*"

"Stop it," I mutter again. "It's fucking hot."

His eyes narrow. His damp, white t-shirt clings to his body like a second skin, showing every fucking muscle, groove, and tattoo.

He needs to just shut his mouth.

Shut his mouth and *leave*.

I can't do this anymore. I can't *take it* anymore. And if this asshole says one more goddamn word, I swear, I'm going to—

"Fuck—"

Snap.

Roman gasps as I grab him by the neck of his t-shirt, spin him around and slam him against the wooden, slatted wall of the steam room. If I wasn't already at my breaking point—which I am—that *goddamn* whimper of his coming out of his throat would finish me off.

"Actually," I hiss, slamming my body against his, the sweat-slicked muscles of his chest flexing against mine through his t-shirt. I can feel his pulse slamming wildly, hear his breath catching as the masculine, fucking *delicious* scent of him invades my senses. "It's more like fuck *you*."

I press even harder against him, feeling the ragged gasping of his breath and his heart galloping out of control.

…And the unmistakable, throbbing, twitching, *needy* fucking pulse of his fat cock swelling against mine.

"And when I *am* fucking you," I snarl as I lower my mouth to his ear. "I'm going to make you come in ways *Dasha* never will."

Roman whimpers—fucking *whimpers*—and whatever brakes were left on this runaway train turn molten as we go flying off the track.

"You're *mine*, wreckage."

"I—"

"So just *shut the FUCK up*."

My mouth slams to his, crushing his perfect lips in a fierce, brutal, shattering kiss.

…And there's no going back now.

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9

ROMAN

WHEN HIS MOUTH crashes to mine, it's like falling into a vortex. Like the ground just dropped out from underneath me.

But the fucked-up thing is, it doesn’t feel like I’m falling.

It feels like I’m flying.

I shudder as his mouth attacks mine: kissing, biting, sucking. *Devouring*. Lips and tongue and teeth clash as he pins me to the wall with that strength that always demolishes mine. And when his tongue pushes past my lips and into my mouth, the guttural *moan*—fucking hell, that *moan*—that escapes my throat seems as loud as the screaming in my ears.

Something vicious and wild comes alive inside me. Like I’m watching myself on a movie screen, hungrily staring and waiting to see what I do next.

There’s still a part of me—a dark, fucked-up part—that roars and howls as I fall into Val. The part that *demands* “normalcy” and desperately clings to the status quo as I smash past every wall around this explosive part of myself that I’ve called so many things.

Darkness. Sickness. Corruption.

The thing that comes alive when Val kisses me.

It feels like I’m drowning in the most blissful way possible. My body softens, melting against him as he grabs my jaw with one hand, my hip with

the other, pinning me to the wall as he grinds against me.

Well, not *all* my body goes soft.

Not in the least.

I shudder again, gasping and moaning into his mouth as Val's hand slides from my hip to the front of my shorts. He cups my swollen cock, groaning into my lips as his fingers wrap around my shaft through the thin nylon.

Christ, I've never been so hard in my life. I moan as he squeezes me, slowly stroking up and down my shaft as I hungrily devour his tongue.

"You're so fucking hard for me, wreckage," Val growls against my panting mouth. He slides his hand down my nylon-covered cock until I gasp in pure heaven when he strokes over my swollen head. My dick jumps, and I shiver in ecstasy when I feel precum leaking into my shorts.

"I think someone's getting even harder," he growls. "And making a fucking *mess* inside these shorts…"

He starts to stroke a little faster, and when he molds his body to mine, a thrill zips through me as I feel the rock-hard pulse of his cock against my thigh.

Christ, he's fucking big.

"*Fuck*," Val groans against my mouth, sucking on my lower lip. "I think this big dick of yours wants to come out to play."

His hand slides back up my achingly hard cock, and his tattooed fingers slip into the waistband of my shorts.

My brain starts to short-circuit. It's like I'm a fucking teenager again, fooling around with a girl for the first time, getting all trembly and jittery when she starts to put her hand down my pants.

Except I was *never* this jittery and trembly with a girl.

Val's hand slips down inside my shorts, his fingers pushing over my abs and into the neatly trimmed hair, edging toward my swollen dick.

"*I—*"

He pauses and I groan, my brow furrowed, my eyes hooded, my mouth hanging open.

“Is that hesitation?” he murmurs against my bottom lip before suddenly biting down on it. I gasp sharply, whining as his fingers tease barely an inch from the base of my cock.

“*No*…!” I hear myself gasp. “*It’s not.*”

“You want me to take your big dick out and stroke it, wreckage?”

I don’t know why he’s calling me that, and I don’t care. All I know is, it feels like I’m losing my fucking mind in the most lurid way possible, and I don’t want the feeling ever to stop.

Not even when the voices inside me scream for me to get a grip on myself.

To be brutal. To be unmerciful.

To be a fucking *man*.

But right now, those voices and the instinct to convince myself this isn’t me are no match for the explosive feeling coursing through my veins like pure hedonistic adrenaline as Val’s fingers hover an inch from crossing that line.

“*Yes.*…”

He groans as his mouth drags over my neck, then he sucks the lobe of my ear between his lips and bites down, making me whimper again and my cock pulse and jump.

“*Say please*.”

“Fuck—”

“I said say *please*, Roman…”

“*Please!*” I blurt in a desperate voice I don’t recognize. “*Please, Val.*…”

“*Good boy*.”

Holy. *Fuck*.

It’s the combination of him fucking calling me that paired with the sensation of the hot steam room air against my skin as he pulls my shorts down over my pulsing erection. My dick springs free, slapping against my abs before Val groans deeply and wraps his fingers around it.

“*Fuck. ME*,” he growls, nipping at my bottom lip. “This fucking *cock*…”

He tightens his grip on me, and my breath leaves my body. His hand begins to stroke up and down, his thumb running over the underside and then sliding up over the tip to tease against the hole.

Christ.…

“*There we go*,” Val groans against my neck. “There’s that fucking precum I’ve been feeling leaking into your shorts.”

He rubs his thumb over my slit again, gathering the sticky fluid there and swiping it up the underside of my shaft as I shudder. He brings his hand up, and I watch with wide, stunned eyes as he licks his thumb clean with a groan.

“Fuck, you taste like candy.”

His eyes lock with mine as he drags his palm over his tongue before reaching for me again. This time, his hand is slick with spit when it curls around my cock and starts to stroke.

Fuck. The sound that erupts from my throat is like none I’ve ever made before. And when he keeps stroking his wet hand up and down my dick, the sound tumbles out again as my legs start to shake.

Val groans deeply. “Well, well,“ he growls. “Do you get all subby and whimper-y like this for all the *girls* you fuck, trying to convince yourself you're something you’re not?”

“*Shut up*,” I groan.

“*Make me*,” he groans back.

He starts to jerk my cock faster, and I choke brokenly as my legs start trembling again.

“Fuck…*Val*…” I gasp breathlessly as he pumps up and down, running his thumb over my head with every stroke. “Someone might hear—”

“Then let’s stop those sexy moans of yours.”

His mouth slams to mine, his tongue plunging inside, and I’m back in that swirling vortex, being tossed around by forces I don’t understand.

I feel a tug, then smooth, hot muscle against my thigh.

I look down, and my eyes widen.

Holy fuck.

He’s just dropped the towel that was around his lean waist. The towel is now on the ground at our feet, and that hot muscle I feel twitching?

It’s his cock.

His *huge*, thick, veined, very swollen cock.

Val keeps stroking me up and down as I stare at his dick, open-mouthed.

“Touch it,” he murmurs. “Take your hand, wrap it around my dick, and do what I’m doing to you. Stroke me like you’d stroke yourself.”

I hesitate, my fingers twitching. Val squeezes my dick, making me groan and whimper.

Slowly, my hand reaches for him.

It’s such an alien feeling, wrapping my hand around another man’s cock for the first time. It’s so like mine and yet…not. The veins run in different patterns. The head is a slightly darker purple. He’s a little thicker…

And holy fuck, touching him makes me come *alive*.

I start to stroke, and Val groans deep in his throat before his mouth crushes to mine again.

“*Fuck yes*,” he rasps. “Jerk it like it’s your own, the way you’d like it.”

I shiver, stroking him a little faster and tightening my grip as he does the same to me.

“*Good boy*,” Val purrs. “Come on, wreckage, jerk my big fucking cock while I stroke you off. Pump that fat dick while I make your balls tighten up for me.”

Whatever last shreds of sanity I had left crumble to dust. I slam my mouth to his, devouring his tongue and moaning shamelessly into his lips. My one hand pumps his cock while the other somehow finds itself cupping his face and sliding up into his hair. Val moans deeply, jerking me faster and grabbing my jaw as if to swallow me whole.

We start to pump harder, both shaking and quivering. I’m dimly aware of him half ripping, half yanking my shirt off before our bodies slam together again: hard chest to hard chest, abs flexing against each other and trapping our cocks and our hands between us. The sweat, steam, and precum make us slippery and wet, and I can feel myself start to teeter on the edge.

“*Val—*” I choke, my body starting to shake in ways I never have, my toes curling against the wooden floor.

“Don’t fight it, wreckage. Come for me. I want to feel that big dick pump your hot cum all over my fucking cock. Fucking let go, motherfucker. Let go and *make a fucking mess for me*.”

I try to fight it. I really do. But between the demanding tone in his voice and the feel of his strong hand stroking me so fucking perfectly…

I lose the fight.

Hard.

With a gasp, I moan desperately into his mouth, kissing him fiercely as my balls draw up tight and my cock begins to violently twitch and pulse. Hot ropes of cum explode from my swollen head, splattering all over my abs and his, dripping down over our dicks and hands.

“*Fuck*, that’s fucking hot,” Val groans just as his dick twitches in my hand.

Suddenly, he’s coming.

I made him come.

I crush my mouth to his, kissing him deeply, pumping his cock up and down, his cum and mine mixed together all over his fat dick. I keep jerking him until he finally chokes and pulls away, his hand wrapping around mine to slow it.

"*Holy fuck*," he hisses, panting as heavily as I am before he looks up at me. Our eyes lock, and suddenly, he's pinning me to the wall and kissing me like he wants to eat me alive.

Gradually, I realize his mouth is moving—licking and nibbling and sucking down to the corner of my mouth, then my jawline.

Then my neck.

He kisses and bites and licks his way down my chest, making my pulse skip, swirling his tongue around one of my nipples.

He keeps going. I don't realize what's happening until Val suddenly drops to his knees.

"Wait, what are you—"

"*This*."

I'm still hard as steel when his hot mouth wraps around my head without warning. And as he slowly sinks down my shaft, swallowing half of my dick in one go, and raises his eyes to mine…

I have no control left whatsoever.

It's like pulling a trigger. I'm barely in his mouth for twenty seconds, his tongue swirling over the underside, before I'm coming all over again.

I cry out, moaning and twitching and shaking as my sticky cum explodes into his mouth—over and over, burst after burst, rope after rope, until I'm quite literally gasping for air.

Slowly, his eyes still locked with mine, Val slips his mouth off my cock. He stands, and before I know what's happening, he's grabbing my jaw and slamming our mouths together.

Hot cum floods across my tongue. At first, I try to recoil, but Val doesn't let me. He just keeps me trapped between his mouth and the wall behind me, kissing me and feeding me my own cum, mixed with his that was coating my dick.

When he pulls away, the moment hangs suspended in time. Like a freeze-frame of my life that I never want to move on from.

"Now, was that really so fucking bad?" Val chuckles.

Then, the house of cards comes crashing down.

And all I feel is abject *horror*.

Val's opening his mouth to say something else when I quickly push past him without a word.

"Roman?"

I'm silent as I awkwardly bend down to grab my shorts and t-shirt up off the floor. I yank them both on, facing away from him and feeling a crawling self-loathing spreading all over my skin.

"Hi, hello, what the fuck's happening?" Val growls.

"I have to go."

"Uh…"

I don't turn around. I just finish tugging my sweaty t-shirt back down over my torso, still facing away from him.

"*Okaaay*?"

"Bye."

I start to reach for the door.

"Do you want to, like, talk about this? Like, to process—"

"I'm fine."

Val snorts behind me. "Um, yeah, no, you're not. Roman—"

“I said I’m *fine*,” I snap, still not looking at him.

“Jesus, Roman—”

“*I’m not fucking gay, okay*?!”

The steam room goes silent for a few long seconds, until I hear the slow exhale of his breath and a mirthless, brittle chuckle.

“*Wow*,” he says dryly. “Then somebody should give you a goddamn Oscar for that performance of ‘Best Subby Little Gay Bitch’.”

I whirl on him with murder in my eyes and a snarl on my lips.

“Fuck you.”

Val rolls his eyes. “Look, you’re processing. Hey, I’ve *been* there. If you just want to talk...”

He reaches for me, probably totally innocently, maybe to rest his hand on my shoulder. But before he does that, I flinch away.

A survival instinct.

As if any touching whatsoever after what just happened makes it more than a biological need to get off.

It makes it…intimate.

With a *guy*.

“Don’t touch me.”

I want it to sound like a plea, like something I *need* him to hear, and moreover need him to understand. But it comes out all wrong.

It doesn’t sound like a plea.

It sounds like a fuck you.

“Huh,” Val grunts. “Well, *that’s* fun.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, desperately trying to find a way to explain.

But that ship has sailed.

“The fuck is your problem?” Val mutters.

“Just…don’t fucking touch me, okay?!” I blurt, my nerves shattering. “Understand?”

Val smiles coldly at me. “*Yeah*, fuck-head.”

“I mean it—”

“I fucking heard you the first time!” Val snaps. “It’s just a little hard to take you seriously when you’re still hard and you’ve got *cum* on your lips.”

My face burns like the sun as I bring up a shaky hand and quickly wipe it across my mouth, smearing away the evidence. I adjust myself in my shorts, feeling the horrible awkwardness that this moment has become descending over us.

“I’m leaving.”

“Yeah, *got that*,” Val says blandly. “*Bye*.”

I turn to go, my pulse jumping erratically. As I reach for the door, Val sighs heavily behind me.

“Look, Roman—”

I don’t mean to do it. But I’m in such a state of confusion and shock, and my system is flooded with so much dopamine, that when his hand lands heavily on my shoulder, I react as if I’m in the ring with him, not like we just shared a sexual experience.

The way I whirl toward him is more a muscle spasm than anything else. And when I feel the crunch of my elbow slamming into his face, fresh horror washes over me. The color drains from my face as I stare in shock at the blood gushing out of Val’s nose from where my elbow crashed into it.

“The *fuck*, Roman!”

“Shit, Val! I’m—”

“I did say I heard you the first time, fuckhead!” Val spits, snatching his towel off the ground and storming right up to me, blood trickling over his mouth and turning his bared teeth pink and red.

I flinch, my eyes wide as I stare at him, mouth agape.

“Val, I—”

His finger jabs my chest violently.

“Figure your fucking shit out, *asshole*.”

He kicks open the door to the steam room and storms out.

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10

ROMAN

SOMETIMES, when the bottom drops out, it feels like there is no end to the long fall into the abyss that follows.

Metal music pounds around me, roaring like a dragon, slamming into my skull as I throw my head back and fucking *scream* into the madness rampaging around me. Someone knocks into me, half spinning me around. I barely feel it—and even if I did, I wouldn't give a shit.

The name of the game tonight is *numb*.

Bury. Excise.

Anesthetize. Neutralize. Vaporize.

Fucking *euthanize*.

I barely feel the shot glass in my hand as I bring it to my lips and dump the contents down my throat, reveling in the burn and craving more, more, *more*.

Doomsday, the wild dance club that Laz part owns, is usually my go-to. But when I'm like this—when I'm well and truly fucked, shattering, screaming, and fucking drowning—I can't go there.

I need something rawer. More violent, like a punch to the fucking chest. And if I'm too fucked up for the fight club, I come here, to Reaper: a grungy, hellish metal club deep in the East Village.

A place where you can look your demons in the eyes and scream in their faces as you choke them on their own blood.

A live band—three guitar players, a bassist, two drummers, and a guy screaming pure death into a mic—unleashes a wall of noise into the crowd of goths, fuck-ups, burn-outs, rejects, monsters…the broken and the damned who fill this place either to celebrate or hide from their own darkness.

And I fit *right fucking in*.

I flinch as the memories come rushing back into my cortex—the explosion of pure ecstasy, followed by the blackness trying to swallow me whole. Craving more of his touch—fuck, craving *ALL* of him. Needing it. Hungering for it.

And then fucking hating myself for it.

The cold, brutal, icy snarl of disapproval. Of shame. Of a hatred that runs so deep it bleeds from my veins.

But also the feel of his body tightening against mine. His kisses. His firm grip on me. His release. His mouth…fuck, *his mouth*…

And then all I see is blood dripping from his nose and that look on his face. I see it every fucking time I look in the mirror and want to smash my reflection.

A guy with wildly spiked silver hair, wearing a black leather vest full of band patches, slams into me. I grin savagely and shove back, violence detonating in my eyes. For a second, it looks like he's going to push me again. But when he sees the pure venom leaking from my fucking soul and oozing from my pores, he reconsiders. He puts his palms up and I'm pretty sure he mouths "chill, bro" over the thunderous music screaming through the club.

Fuck, I needed that. I need more.

I whirl, shoving another metalhead headbanging behind me. He grins, looking almost as crazy as I fucking feel, and returns the favor. I snarl and raise a fist, as if to drive it through his face, and by proxy through the black

void and the all-consuming cancer spreading through my body and mind like a plague of locusts.

But he just grins even wider, then throws his head back and fucking howls before he suddenly wraps an arm around the back of my neck and thumps my chest heavily.

“HERE!” he roars, yanking a little baggie out of his pocket. “Let’s fucking *GO*!”

He taps a bump of coke out onto the back of his hand, between his thumb and index finger, and raises it to his nose. He snorts it, and his eyes light up with that narcotic glow of pure unfiltered reality that only drugs can bring.

He grins and offers me the bag, watching gleefully as I tap a huge amount onto the back of my hand and lower my face.

FUCK. YES.

Alcohol has always been my go-to. It’s what dulls the edges when life tries to fucking gut me. But sometimes, it’s not enough. Sometimes, I need something faster, something *more* to forget who and what I am, and the chaos I’m fucking drowning in that nobody else sees.

The cocaine explodes in my veins, igniting my cells and turning my insides to liquid fire. The man roars, grinning like a fucking maniac as my eyes glaze over. He throws his head back and *howls* up into the madness.

I do the same.

Then we’re both shoving more drugs up our noses, until I’m a frothing, raving, screaming angel of death and destruction, pushing my way through the crowd like a rampaging bull—roaring and snarling into the face of anyone who even dares to look at me.

I slam back two shots in rapid succession at the bar and then slump heavily against it, chasing them with half a beer as I yank out my phone.

My skin is tingling and my vision blurring in and out of focus as I open Instagram. I hesitate for a second, telling myself that I don’t need to do this. That I don’t *want* to do this.

But I tap on Val’s profile anyway.

I start to scroll, trying to pretend my gaze isn't lingering hungrily on the shots of him backstage at the Mercury Theater, his head thrown back in a crazy laugh as he peels off his shirt, revealing the gorgeous, intricate swirls of ink over his chiseled abs, and those V-lines of his hips driving right down…

I flinch, but I can’t look away. I keep scrolling, ogling the shots of his gorgeous jawline, his perfect fucking mouth, and his eyes…

Blackness consumes me. A cold, leering, sneering shadow points its finger and fucking *laughs* at me.

Queer.

Sissy.

Homo.

Be a fucking man.

BE. A. FUCKING. MAN.

And still I can’t look away. Not even when I scroll down to photos of him with…others. A slender, model-looking guy hugging him from behind, kissing his grinning cheek. Two bubbly blonde girls with their tits falling out of their bikini tops at a pool with him, shrieking with laughter as he lifts each of them with a muscled arm, their fingers splayed across his bare chest.

I want to fucking break those goddamn French manicured fingers one by one. I want to find that pretty boy and stub out cigarettes on his fucking lips.

I want to destroy.

To consume.

To take take take and fucking TAKE.

I want…God help me…

My eyes squeeze shut.

Him.

You want HIM.

No, I don't. I don't.

Liar.

I don't want—

LIAR.

I'm not attracted to men—

FUCKING LIAR!

I realize my beer is gone and turn, grabbing another one and a shot of vodka from the bartender. I chase the first with the second, numbing my mind enough that I'm merely watching in slow motion from the outside as I tap on Val's profile and let my thumb drift to the direct message button.

ME

I'm sorry

Nothing happens. No trumpets or fanfare.

Nothing.

ME

I'm VERY sorry. I didn't mean to hit you like that.

ME

I liked it.

ME

Not the hitting you part. Before.

ME

You and I…

I stare at the phone, wanting something to happen. Fucking *needing* something to happen. But nothing does. No magical response. No parade.

No answer at all.

This time, the bartender shakes his head when I ask him for another two shots.

Fuck him.

As soon as he turns to serve a few goth girls near the end of the bar, I reach over it, grab the bottle of vodka from the speed rail, and storm my way back into the surging mass of violence roiling and churning in front of the stage.

Madness consumes me. Violence ignites in my veins as I throw my head back, drinking deeply, and smash my way blindly through the crowd.

MORE.

I need *MORE*.

I toss my head back again, howling bloody fucking murder into the thunder. Bodies slam into me, and I slam back. Someone whirls and hits me, and when the blood explodes from my lip, I roar in delight, grabbing the guy by the shoulders, cackling madly, spraying blood into his face before he shoves me away.

Back into the madness.

Into the violence.

Into the endless hatred surging through my heart.

Someone grabs my shoulder from behind.

“ROMAN.”

I snarl, my face feral as I turn, my hands shooting out and wrapping like iron around the neck in front of me.

“*ROMAN!*”

Hands are shaking me even as I’m squeezing, snarling, not even seeing as I allow myself to drown in the violence that numbs the self-hatred.

And then the guy hits me, hard, in the face.

My grip loosens enough to be pried from the throat it was wrapped around. I'm violently steered through the crowd and thrown bodily against a wall. When I whirl with pure murder bubbling from my chest, a palm slams into me, shoving me back to the wall again as he roars my name.

"*ROMAN*. LOOK AT ME."

The black and blood-red haze thins slightly, clearing from my vision until I realize the face I'm snarling at is a familiar one.

Bane glares at me, his dark eyes filled with lethal, barely contained fury, his teeth bared.

His throat bruised…

Fuck.

"You in there, motherfucker!?" he yells into my face.

I blink, nodding stiffly, the narcotic burn still throbbing through my senses.

"What are you doing here!?" I yell over the music, my body still twitching from all the coke, my eyes unable to focus as they dart everywhere at once.

"Making sure you don't fucking kill yourself!" he yells back. "Or someone else!" His eyes narrow as he steps closer. "Lyra saw you at Doomsday earlier." He peers at me closely. "Said you didn't look good, man."

Fuck, I was at Doomsday?

"She was *worried* about you," he growls. "Which is why she called Carmine, who messaged the rest of the crew." He frowns. "We've been looking all over the fucking city for you, man."

"Well," I smile wildly, swaying on my feet and bobbing my head to the thunderous sound of the band. I clap a hand firmly on his shoulder as I start to push past him. "Lemme know if you find me."

Bane grabs my arm and yanks me back, his face concerned. "Rome, the *fuck* is going on?"

"Just having a good time, 'sall."

“Your nose is bleeding.”

I shrug. Bane blows out a breath. “C’mon, Rome. Talk to me. This is beyond—”

“Beyond what??” I snarl. “My usual fucked-up-ness?”

He looks me dead in the eye. “You know what I mean.”

“You worried about me, Bane?” I blurt, grinning maniacally like a madman and tasting the blood dripping from my coked-up nose.

I need a drink.

Fuck, I need *twenty* drinks.

“*Of course* I am,” he hisses, stepping into my space. “Fuck, Roman. What’s this about? The wedding? Dasha?”

I bark out a single, cold laugh and clap him on the shoulder again.

“Thanks for dropping by, Antonov.”

“ROMAN!”

Bane whirls as I brush past him. But he doesn’t try to grab me this time.

“You’ve got fucking friends, man! You’ve got Evie!” he barks. “Whatever the fuck you’re dealing with…Roman… You *do not have* to deal with it alone!”

I laugh coldly, turning just enough to glance back at him.

“You’re worried about me?”

“Yeah! I fucking am!”

“Well, don’t be!” I grin, turning and spreading my arms wide as I step back into the roaring, raging crowd of death behind me. “I’m fuckin’ *fine*!”

I love Bane, just like I love all my friends. Like I love my sister.

But they can’t help me.

I can’t let them get close to me, or I’ll make them sick too.

Because that’s what I am.

Contagion.

Corruption.

A fucking black hole.

And it's time to disappear into it.

Bane’s still watching me, his face tight and his eyes blazing as I melt into the crowd, arms raised, and let the swarming mass of chaos and violence and darkness envelop me.

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11

VAL

ROMAN

I’m sorry

I TAKE a slow drag of my cigarette and exhale, leaning against the brick wall at my back and looking up at the city looming above me.

The alley behind the Mercury Theater is a bit of a transitional zone where we—the dancers—step out of the real world and pause for a moment to discard outside things like overdue rent, relationship issues, self-doubt, family shit, or whatever. It's a place to shed who we are *off* stage and become who we are *on* it.

I’m not a religious person, never will be. But I dunno. To me, this alley is hallowed ground. A sacred space.

You can still hear the traffic of Madison Avenue and East 49th Street and the general background din of the city throbbing like a concrete heartbeat around you. But it’s still a place of peace for me.

I’m early this morning, which is good. I need a little longer here today. I frown, slowly dragging on the cigarette again as my eyes skim over Roman’s obviously sloppy-drunk DMs from five nights ago.

I’ve already read them.

Several, several times.

I've even been tempted to respond.

But fuck him. Not in the fun way. In the "fire him out of a goddamn cannon, directly away from me," way.

My lips purse as I take another drag, trying to clear my head of any thoughts concerning Crown Prince Dickhead himself.

Seriously, fuck him. I cannot and *will not* deal with his hot-and-cold, will-he-or-won't-he, "*I'm not gay*" bullshit.

No fucking interest.

Nope.

None.

I close my eyes as porn-level replays of the other day in the steam room come rushing back—and not for the first time, either. They've been the feature attraction of my nights recently when I've been stroking myself, remembering every detail of that man shaking and quivering and *moaning* into my mouth.

The feel of his muscles clenching and twitching. The sound of his breath catching. Those sexy moans—*fuck me*, those moans.

It hit me the other night just what it is about Roman that *fucks with me* so much. Turns me on so fucking much.

It's the dichotomy. The way the whole world sees him as this strong, brutal, tough motherfucker…which I'm sure he *is*…except when he's with me.

Specifically, when I've got him in a position of submission—pinned to the ground, or to a wall. My breath on his neck and my teeth feasting on his ear lobe as his cock twitches against mine.

That's what does it for me: he's this beast to the world, but a mewling little kitten when I've got his cock in my hand.

And that fucking *cock*.

Personally, I'm a huge fan of my own. It's my favorite dick in the world, and I feel like I'm qualified to make that call after seeing a pretty fucking healthy collection of them. But Roman's is quickly climbing the charts and might be a solid second place already.

And you haven't even fucked him yet…

I scowl and take a heavy pull on the cigarette.

Yeah, you won't, either.

I've decided: this is *done*. Hence me not responding to his drunk-ass DMs.

I mean, look, I *get it*. I understand that reconciling who you think you are and who you *actually are* isn't easy, especially when society still tells you that one of those things is "normal" and the other is not.

Nobody fucking *chooses* to be in the minority of anything, to be banished to the fringe wastelands of "normal-town" where you used to live.

Again, I fucking understand. It's not like someone gave me a first-class ticket to the coming-out express. I had to fucking fight for it. I bled for it.

But sometimes, that's what it takes to be free to be *you.*

Regardless, this isn't my fucking fight at all. It's his—or not, if he decides to stay in that fucking closet he's made so delightfully comfy and cozy for himself.

Not my problem. Not my issue. Not my concern.

Not my fight.

What I need is a distraction…ideally, a *carnal* one…so I can fuck Roman out of my head.

I frown, already knowing it's a bad idea as I text Chrissy, one of my usual go-to fuck buddies. Chrissy is basically always DTF, enjoys sex almost as much as I do, and has a very fun clit piercing.

When she doesn't immediately respond—yes, I know it's eight in the fucking morning, but still—I send the same message to Gerard, *another* of my regular booty calls.

Gerard is fun because of his lack of a gag reflex. Also, though he's bi, he’s *super* femme and can take a fucking *pounding*.

I exhale slowly, chewing on my bottom lip.

The problem is, even though both these people have been very fun to play with in the past, and are both supremely excellent candidates for milking Roman out of my system via my dick, and even though I literally just texted them asking if they want to hook up later…

I’m not actually interested. To the point that if they text me back, I’m not sure I'll respond.

Fuck.

I was hoping that texting them would erase the Roman situation from my head. But the second I message them, it’s like there’s a little figure on my shoulder, shaking its head and scowling.

An image of Brooklyn as a stern, disappointed fairy, tut-tutting me and waving her wand angrily, pops into my head. Just then, my phone dings.

CHRISSY

LOL speak of the devil. We were just talking about u

Another text comes through. This one is a selfie she’s just taken, naked, lying face-down with her ass up in the air and none other than Gerard plowing her from behind.

CHRISSY

come join?! :D I want your gorgeous cock in me.

I smirk as I peer at their lust-filled faces…faces that are flushed, with wide, dilated pupils. Okay, it's obvious why they’re up at eight in the morning. They’re still fucked up from whatever they took last night—speed or coke, knowing them—to keep the marathon fuck-fest going.

CHRISSY

LOL. Gerard says “same” LMAO

I take a slow drag of my cigarette instead of answering.

It should be tempting. It should be *more* than tempting. Not tempting enough for me to skip rehearsal. I never do that for anything. But tempting enough for me to tell them to take a few more hits and keep the party going until I can join them later.

But there's nothing tempting about the offer at all. And when my dick starts to grow hard, it's not because I'm imagining Gerard and Chrissy taking turns deep throating me or bending over and saying *please, Daddy, fuck my slutty hole*.

It's because the fantasy has abruptly switched to someone *else* doing the very same things.

Ding ding ding…motherfucking *Roman*.

God. Fucking. Dammit.

Why am I hard for that fucker? Who, I might add, *hit me*—I mean, obviously not on purpose, but still. Why the fuck am I turned on by that and the hundred other red flags that are Roman Nikitin?

"Will you please fucking quit those things already?"

I don't bother responding to Chrissy, just set my phone down on the metal fire escape next to me. Then I look up and grin around my cigarette at Naomi.

"Good morning to you, too, baby girl."

Naomi, another dancer with the Zakharova that I'm about as close with as I am with Brooklyn, eyes my cigarette despairingly. "Seriously. Gross. Toss it, please?"

I sigh and nod my chin at the two coffees in her hands. "Depends. One of those for me?"

"Duh, of course, bitch," she grins. "Only if you lose the cancer stick, though."

"Don't try to tell me what to do, *Mom*!" I sigh dramatically.

Naomi rolls her eyes. "You want the coffee or not?"

“*God*, yes.”

I toss the cigarette away and gratefully pluck the to-go cup from her hand.

“What up, bitches!”

We both turn to see Lyra approaching down the alley, coffee in hand, her dance bag slung over her shoulder.

“What are we chatting about?” She grunts as she drops the heavy bag to the ground and hops up onto the fire escape, next to where I was just perched.

“Val’s disgusting smoking habit,” Naomi grumbles.

Lyra makes a face, pulling her red hair back and quickly twisting it up into a dancer’s bun. “For real—it’s fucking disgusting. Total turnoff.”

“Well, luckily for all of us,” I smile sweetly, “I’ve never concerned myself with whether or not I turn you on or—”

“*Eew!*” Lyra chokes out a laugh, throwing the napkin wrapped around her coffee cup at me and making a face. “Why are you *so* gross?”

“Come on, baby,” I tease, lifting my shirt and rolling my stomach muscles. “You know you want a piece of this.”

Lyra groans and rolls her eyes. Naomi makes a tsk-tsk sound.

“You remember the part where Lyra's husband is the head of a Mafia family, yeah?” Naomi snickers. “Oh, and certifiably cray-cray?”

Lyra snorts. “I mean, no lie detected, but have you met *your* man?”

“As if we need to be reminded how incestuous this little group of ours is,” I groan, making a face.

Lyra’s husband, Carmine, is the don of the Barone family—and yes, certifiably fucking insane. Naomi’s boyfriend-slash-probably-husband-any-day-now is Carmine’s brother, Nico.

…Who is *also*, in my totally unqualified opinion, completely psychotic.

For a second, my gaze slides between the two of them as they gab and gossip, laughing together about something that happened at dinner with the four of them last weekend.

I don't have what they have. I've *never* had that. And they found it so easily.

Family. A shared bond. Love.

I mean, I have Vaughn, and don't get me wrong, I fucking love that I've discovered this brother I didn't even know I had. But…it's a slow process with us. We're close, but still not *close*-close. Part of it is the years spent apart, but my brother is also very clear that the Obsidian Syndicate *is* his family, and there's an unspoken follow-up to that that the Syndicate and that brotherhood comes before me and *our* brotherhood.

Eh, it is what it is.

And love?

I snort inwardly.

Love is just a tangle of emotions, fucky brain chemistry, and lust wanting to be something more. I'm happy for Naomi and Lyra, though…and Milena and Brooklyn, for that matter. They found it so easily: that thing I know I won't, because of who I am.

It's not a queer thing.

It's a *me* thing.

On impulse, one hand crosses to the opposite arm, sliding up my forearm, elbow, and then bicep. My fingers slide over the tangle of chaotic ink over that one spot…

The hand drops away, and I blink as I swallow it all back.

Again, it's a *me* thing. It's why I don't allow myself to get close to anything real, ever.

Keep it fun, easy, loose, simple. Nothing serious.

Someone’s phone dings. I reach for my pocket before remembering that I left my phone on the fire escape step.

…Which is when Lyra *shrieks*.

“VAL!” She cracks up, screeching with laughter but also with a look of disgust on her face. She quickly turns away from the phone sitting on the steps next to her—*my* phone—squeezing her eyes shut and giggling loudly.

“What!?” Naomi blurts.

“Someone just texted him a photo of two assholes!”

I grin and reach over to pluck the phone away from Lyra.

“Okay, settle down, let me—”

Oh.

She meant literally. Crissy just sent another pic.

“It’s rude to look at other people’s phones, Lyra,” I tease.

She groans and covers her eyes. “It’s also rude to be such a ho that people are sending you *butthole* selfies at eight in the fucking morning!”

I sigh dramatically. “I’m feely *very* judged here,” I mutter. “And since when do we kink shame?”

“I dunno,” Lyra grins. “Maybe *some* shaming would be healthy?”

I flip her off, making her giggle. “For your information, though it’s none of your fucking business, I was a good boy this weekend. Minimal shenanigans.”

Zero, actually, unless we're counting the multiple jerk-fests I had, solo, while thinking of all the ways I’d like to defile Roman Nikitin.

“Oh my God, are we sure the world is still turning?” Naomi says, a dramatically worried look on her brow.

“Whatever,” I roll my eyes. “You're just annoyed that you settled for *one* dick for the rest of your lives and have to live vicariously through my

hookups now.”

Naomi arches an amused brow, glancing past me to Lyra.

“You heard the *settled* part, right?”

Lyra smirks. “Girl, I will *settle* for what I get at home, on the reg, *every time*.”

“Yup,” Naomi giggles. “I’ll settle right down on top of that—”

“Okay, okay, *Jesus*,” I groan. “Who’s being fucking gross now? Remember the part where you’re both like sisters to me?”

“Yeah, sisters who get A-plus dick at home!” Lyra crows, laughing hysterically as she and Naomi high-five.

I shoot them a sour look. “We done now?”

“Hey, you started it with that pic on your phone,” Lyra snickers.

Naomi makes a face. “Do I need to see this photo? TWO of your hookups texted you their asses at the same time?”

“Literally in the same pic,” Lyra cracks up.

Naomi sighs and shakes her head. “Is this a cry for help? Are you spiraling?”

I’m flipping her off when Lyra turns serious. “Oh, before Evie gets here…” She frowns, lowering her voice. “Speaking of spiraling…I was at Doomsday the other night for a hot second.” Her brow furrows. “I saw Roman there.”

My jaw tightens. “Yeah?” I mutter under my breath.

She nods, still frowning. “Yeah…” Her lips twist. “He did *not* look good. Like he was trying to pick a fight or something. And he was *shitfaced*. Like, I went over and said hi to him and he looked right through me. It was spooky.”

Naomi's brow creases. “That’s…not good.”

“Well,” I shrug, “maybe he’s precisely what no one wants to say out loud: a grouchy dickhead with a serious drinking problem.”

“Val!” Lyra glares at me.

“What?”

“I mean,” she shrugs, “he’s obviously going through something, or…I don’t know…just try having a little compassion?”

“I’ll take that under advisement,” I snort.

I don’t tell them that I’m pretty sure I know exactly what Roman is going through. Intimately, and all too well.

A piece of him knows exactly who and what he is. And the rest of him is rebelling against it, and refusing to acknowledge that truth.

Bluntly, it’s called self-hate, and I want no fucking part of it where that asshole is concerned.

“Uh…” I clear my throat. “How bad *was* he?”

“*Bad*,” Lyra says, serious worry in her voice. “Like, super fucked up, angry, sad…I dunno. I called Carmine and he said he and the guys would try to track him down and make sure he was okay.”

The guys. Carmine and Nico Barone, Nero De Luca, Bane Antonov, and usually Laz Kislev too. Those are Roman’s Team Straight buddies, who seem to have some sort of bond, though I have no idea what it is. I *once*—at a party at Nero’s place after he and Milena became a thing—overheard the group of them talking about “the court” in hushed tones, but I have no idea what that was all about.

Anyway, *they* can concern themselves with Roman and his issues.

“Here comes Evie,” Naomi murmurs, turning to wave at our innocent friend coming down the alley with her dance bag. “Let’s change the subject. I don’t want to worry her.” She turns back to us. “What are we doing tomorrow? It’s Friday.”

Lyra perks up. “Maybe Doomsday?” I think I heard Laz say this kickass DJ from Madrid will be there.” She turns to wink at me. “I looked him up. *Super* cute, and totally your type.”

Perfect. Right now, my type is “comfortable with their sexuality”, i.e., “not Roman Nikitin”.

All I need to do is ignore the confused fucker with a drinking problem and shake him from my system.

Easy-peasy, lemon squeezy.

Done.

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12

VAL

My nose wrinkles as Naomi slides the shot glass across the table to me.

“Fuck you.”

She laughs loudly as she slips next to me into the VIP booth at Doomsday. I don’t really know why this club has become *the* weekend hangout spot for the Zakharova crew. Okay, I do: because Laz Kislev, who pals around with —yes, I’ll say his name, but only fucking once—*Roman*, Bane, Nero, Carmine and Nico, is a part owner of the place. Laz is *also* a man-whore approaching altitudes *I’ve* achieved, which is…saying something.

The difference between us is I view the girls of the Zakharova as sisters, and Laz views them as potential conquests.

I mean, he’s not a creep about it, but let's just say I’ve got my eye on him.

Like *hell* am I going to let any of my girls slum it with that ho.

Anyway, one of the big perks for our crew when it comes to Doomsday is that Laz has us all on the permanent guest list, which means no line, ever, and a comped booth in the VIP section whenever we want it.

At this point, I’m not sure what ballerina tree he’s even barking up anymore, given that Lyra, Naomi, Milena, and Brooklyn are all *firmly* spoken for—enough that not even Laz would be dumb or ballsy enough to make a play for them. There’s Evie, but I think she’s way too innocent to

catch that whore's attention. There's also Dove, but…well, I honestly don't know there.

Dove is a relatively new member of our crew. And if I thought *I* had a mysterious, murky background, that girl is next level.

It's obviously no secret that she's the oldest daughter of Cesare Marchetti, don of the Marchetti Italian mafia family. But she also disappeared from New York for *years*, and no one has any idea where she went, or why she's back.

The rumor mill says everything from jail, to rehab, to a convent. So… Take your pick.

I mean, she's an *insanely* good dancer—easily one of if not lowkey the best in the entire fucking company, and I don't say that lightly. So wherever she was, she was able to keep practicing.

"Tequila? Seriously?" I push aside any questions about which of my friends Laz is trying to shove his dick into and glare at the shot glass before dragging my gaze back to Naomi's smug face. "Are you high?"

She laughs again. "I mean, if you're going to get your panties in a bunch about it, I can go get you a cranberry and seltzer—"

"Baby girl, the problem is, when I drink tequila, my panties come *off*," I grin.

She rolls her eyes. "Try not to get us banned, 'mkay?"

"Hey, you brought the gasoline, psycho."

Milena, sitting across from us, tosses her blonde locks back and laughs before raising a shot of what I'm *confident* is vodka.

"He has a point. Why *are* you feeding him tequila?"

"My own amusement?" Naomi giggles.

"Ooo, what are we drinking?"

I glance up as Brooklyn and Dove, fresh off the dance floor, slide into the booth. Brooklyn glances past Naomi at me and smirks.

“Anymore buttholes on your phone?” she snorts. “Dude, you gotta raise your standards.”

Dove furrows her brow, smoothing her silvery-pink hair—not gonna lie, *kinda* want to try that look—back into place. “I think I missed something?”

I like Dove, and again, she’s *outrageously* talented. But we’ve never really click-clicked. Partly, she’s got a bit of a wall up when it comes to men. But the rest? Who knows.

“Val, Turboslut that he is—”

“I’m sitting *right here*,” I mutter.

Milena blows me a kiss. “I mean, *debonair cad* that he is…”

I nod my approval. “Much better. Proceed.”

She rolls her eyes and turns back to Dove. “Two total sketchballs texted him their…uh…”

“Assholes,” Brooklyn says with a dry smirk. She glances at me and sighs. “Yeah, I’m gonna go with the rest of them here. You need to raise your standards, buddy.”

I grin as the rest of the booth loses it.

“*Anyway*,” Naomi laughs. “We’re drinking tequila.”

“Or vodka,” Milena amends.

Naomi pushes two shot glasses toward Brooklyn and Dove. “Got you guys.”

Brooklyn groans. Dove just smiles and shrugs her shoulders. “I’m good. Thanks though.”

“You sure?”

She nods her chin. “Yup, all set.”

Curious.

The rest of us do our shots with a cheers.

I’m funny with alcohol. I mean I *like* having a drink, socially. I also *like* certain not very hardcore drugs, occasionally. But I could also do without either one and be completely fine.

I get that some people truly *need* drugs or alcohol to get past social anxiety, to lose their inhibitions a little so they can actually enjoy themselves. I know introverts who drink in social settings simply because *not* drinking in those situations would be impossible for them.

But when I say I could do without either, I mean I could still go out and have a *wild* time without either.

I believe they call that “high on life”..

Just then, another familiar face appears at the table.

“Evie!” Milena blurts, grinning as she jumps out of the booth to hug our friend. “Come sit!”

“Uhh…” Naomi frowns at the neon pink, fishbowl-sized cocktail in her hands. “What’s that?”

Evie grins widely. “These guys at the bar bought it for me! Isn’t it *cute*?”

“Yeah, cute, spelled *alcohol poisoning*,” I mutter as Milena shakes her head and reaches for it.

“Hey!”

Milena plucks the enormous glass out of Evie’s hands. “Evie,” she sighs. “C’mon.”

“But it smells so yummy!”

“Sweetheart, you get tanked off one glass of wine, and *that*,” Milena sighs, jabbing a finger at the Barbie sorority jungle juice from hell, “could literally kill you.”

“Also, A, which fucking guys?” I growl. “And B, who handed it to you—the bartender, or them?”

Evie opens her mouth, thinks, then shuts it. “Them?”

“Yeah, that's a hard nope.” I stand, slide past Naomi, and take the drink out of Milena’s hands. “How about *no one* drinks the roofie colada, deal?”

Evie’s face pales. “But they were nice!”

“Oh, I’m sure they were.” Milena frowns deeply, turning to squeeze my arm. “*Thank you*,” she mouths.

I nod grimly and take the drink up to the bar. It being the single most obnoxious drink on the menu, the bartender remembers exactly who ordered it.

“Pretty sure I saw them leave a minute or so ago,” she yells over the club music. “But I’ll tell Security to review the tape.” She points to a camera near the ceiling, angled toward the bar. “We’ll be able to see if they slipped anything into it.”

“And then?”

She arches a brow. “You're friends with Laz, right?”

“We’re…acquainted.”

She smirks. “Let’s just say, if he spots those guys dropping anything into that drink, if they show up here again it would be *real bad* for their health.”

Laz, I might just be changing my opinion of you. Slightly.

I thank her and head back to the VIP section. Halfway there, my phone buzzes in my pocket.

UNKNOWN

Please. Look im rly sorry

UNKNOWN

about t elbow in ur faccee

My jaw tightens. Mystery fucking solved who *unknown* is.

I almost ignore it. Because I’m off this fucking ride…right?

Except, apparently, I’m not.

I ignore the voice inside calling me a weak, horny shitbag as I start typing.

ME

I don’t remember giving you my number.

UNKNOWN

got it from Evie’s cell

UNKNOWN

sory, hope that’s okya

Goddammit. He’s obviously drunk. But it’s making him get the way that *does* something to me—when big, tough, macho Roman goes all fucking soft and submissive. I mean, the fucker is literally asking for forgiveness, after the fact, for sneaking my number off his sister’s phone.

It’s kind of adorable.

It’s also really fucking *hot*, as much as I want to tell myself otherwise.

Either way, I find myself adding his contact to my phone.

ME

and if it’s not?

I’m fucking with him, because, well, it’s fun.

ROMAN

im sorry

ROMAN

I just rly need 2 talk 2 u

ME

Pretty sure taking someone’s number without permission and texting them is spam, which is a crime, pal.

ROMAN

lol. u remember what my fam does for a living, right?

I feel myself grinning widely at the screen.

Touché, wreckage.

ME

ok not the threat I was going for

ROMAN

LOL

ME

Well? We're talking. Talk.

ROMAN

meet? Face 2 face?

ME

Maybe I don't feel like getting punched in the fucking nose again.

Yeah, I'm still completely fucking with him. I know the elbow was an accident. But I also can tell that he's still really broken up about it, and the idea of making the man squirm a little for me is…a high.

ROMAN

Val, I'm so fking sorry. Please.

ME

okay

ROMAN

you'll meet me?

I suck my lip between my teeth, feeling my cock starting to thicken.

Tempting, Roman. Very, very fucking tempting.

But he won't get off that easy—pun totally fucking intended.

ME

I'm over the hit. That doesn't mean I'm going to jump up and rush on over just because you're horny.

Roman immediately starts typing, and I watch the three dots appear, disappear, appear, disappear, over and over. Until…

ROMAN

I just want to apologize

ME

lol ok

ROMAN

this isn’t about wht hpned. I mean…bfor the elbow.

ME

lol “whAt hAPpEnNed”.

What are we, fucking twelve? Use your big boy words, Roman. This isn’t about ”that time we made out in the steam room and jerked each other off”. Or “that time I was a subby, horny little slut for you, Val.”

About what happened.

Fuck right the fuck off.

ME

If we can’t talk like adults about how hard your fucking cock got when I jerked you off, and how much you whimpered and moaned for it, then I don’t know wtf there is to talk about.

Those fucking dots appear and disappear a bunch of times before he finally figures out what to say.

ROMAN

U came on to ME

My mouth drops open.

Yeah, we’re fucking done here.

I close the text exchange and slip my phone into my pocket before I step back into the VIP area and slide back into our booth.

“All good?” Brooklyn arches a brow.

I nod. “Yeah, they’re going to tell Laz about it.”

“Thank God,” Dove scowls. “He looks like he’d know how to take care of creeps.”

I keep my gaze on Dove a little longer.

Which tree are you barking up now, Laz…

“Hey *hey*, party people!”

I glance up to see a few familiar, grinning faces as more people head over to our booth: Miguel and James, who also dance with the Zakharova. Tate, who was my roommate for a while and is pretty close friends with James. And—

Fuck.

Gerard.

Gerard of the *literal* asshole selfie from this morning, when he was presumably still drugged out of his mind and fucking Chrissy. I vaguely remember him being somewhat friendly with Tate, but why the fuck is he here? *Ugh.*

I'm about to sound like a total dickhead, but my fuck buddies are precisely that: *fuck* buddies. Not real buddies. Not friends I hang out with unless it's a situation involving my dick and one or several of their holes.

Naomi gets up to hug Miguel and James, and say hi to Tate. He slips past her and makes a discreet wincing face as he leans in to bump my fist and clap me on the back.

“Sorry, dude. He was literally waiting outside my place, looking for you.” Tate waggles his brows. “Still prefer the clingy pathetic ones, huh?”

Both Gerard and Chrissy have been texting me all night about the obvious.

I’ve been ignoring them harder than I ignored Roman.

“Hey guys.” Milena, ever charming—when she wants to be—smiles at Miguel and James. “Hey, Tate.”

“Hey, Milena,” he grins. “Still with that boy—”

“Very much so,” she smiles politely.

He sighs. “And he’s still crazy, I guess?”

“*Batshit*,” she grins.

“Cool,” he nods. “Cool cool cool. Well, was worth a shot, right?”

Milena shoots me an exasperated look, then turns to Gerard. “Hi. I'm Milena.”

“Gerard,” he smiles back.

Naomi’s brow furrows. “Gerard…” Her eyes go wide as her face turns pink. “*Oh my God…*” She whirls to stare at me, pure incredulity in her eyes. “*Gerard* is here?”

“*Thanks for the memo,*” I hiss back, out of earshot of the rest of them with the music going.

Brooklyn frowns. “Wait, Gerard as in…”

Yep, it'll click for her in 3…2…1…

“Oh—*GERARD*!” she crows, trying and utterly failing to keep from laughing.

Gerard’s brows knit. “Did I, ah, miss something?”

“Your text message this morning with Chrissy went a little viral,” I mutter.

He blushes, but then grins and shrugs. “Freshly bleached, ladies.”

“*Oh my God…*” Naomi groans, burying her face in her hands. “I need another drink. Anyone else?”

Evie starts to raise her hand but Milena firmly puts it back down for her.

Naomi and Tate head off to the bar and everyone else settles into the huge, curved VIP booth. I grit my teeth, silently groaning when Gerard makes a point of slipping in right next to me, and then fucking sliding his hand onto my thigh.

“You never texted me back,” he pouts, poking me.

I roughly shove his hand away.

“Correct,” I growl.

He pouts harder. “*Why,*” he whines.

“I was ignoring you,” I say flatly, which for some reason makes him giggle and try to put his arm around me.

Yeah, no.

I shrug him off just as my phone buzzes, which I yank out of my pocket and then cock a brow at.

ROMAN
Let me make it up to you.

I suck on my teeth for a second. Then I exhale slowly. Fine, I’ll play this game.

ME
How.

ROMAN
start with buying u a drink?

ME
I already have one, thanks.

ROMAN
looks like ur almost done tho.

What the *fuck*.

I glance around, twisting my neck sharply to scan the club. I see other partiers, couples making out, the packed bar, the pulsing dance floor, the DJ booth…

Wait.

My gaze snaps back to the bar. Roman is standing near the wall, swaying a little on his feet, glassy-eyed but staring right at me.

“Who are you looking for, baby?”

I flinch, recoiling slightly when Gerard settles a little more onto my lap.

“Nobody. Fuck off.”

He laughs. “So *mean*.”

I ignore him, turning my attention back to Roman.

ME
What are you doing here.

His expression, lit by the glow of his phone, sours as his eyes land on Gerard.

ROMAN
Who is that.

A smirk plays across my face.

ME
Jealous?

ROMAN
just a fucking question

ME
Maybe he's the one keeping me from giving a shit about your half-assed apology.

I watch the motherfucker's face twist, thinking it through, before he starts typing again.

ROMAN
I really am sorry. That's not me.

ME
From what I've seen of you at the fight clubs, that is *exactly* you.

ROMAN
I fight in FIGHTS. I don't just hit people. Not if it's not work-related.

Work-related. Jesus.

This man breaks bones, bloodies faces, and generally fucks people up as part of his job.

…I find that *disturbingly* hot.

ME

Fine, whatever. I'm over it.

ROMAN

Please.

He *really* needs to stop say that.

ROMAN

please let me make it up to you

ROMAN

come have a drink with me

I smile cruelly.

ME

Why don't you come over here with that drink you're offering.

ME

Oh, silly me. You'd never do that.

I watch Roman sway on his feet, his lips twisting nervously as he types, deletes, types, deletes.

Over and over and fucking over…

Fuck it.

"Get off."

Gerard giggles. "That's why I'm here." He drops his hand to my crotch, but I shove it away, twisting his wrist hard enough to make him gasp.

"Hey!"

"If I was in the mood," I growl at him. "I'd already have you bent over in the alley outside with my cock buried in your ass."

He grins hungrily.

"But seeing that I'm *not*…" I tilt my head. "Fuck off."

I push Gerard off me and slide out of the booth, vaguely telling everyone that I'm going to get a drink.

Roman can’t wipe the drunk, goofy-ass grin off his face as I approach him.

“Pro tip,” I grunt, stopping in front of him. “Smiling like that makes you look desperate.”

His grin falters and drops.

“Sorry.”

I glare at him. “Well?”

Roman clears his throat. “Look, I’m genuinely sorry if…I mean…I was…”

“Suffering from post-nut straightness?”

His face darkens, his eyes darting around. As if *anyone* can hear us over the DJ.

Also, as if anyone gives a shit.

He exhales. “I… I’ve never done that before.”

I wink salaciously. “Told you: just like jerking your own cock.”

Roman flushes maroon.

“Val, I’m… I’m *not gay*, okay?”

I roll my eyes. “Oh, good. The broken record is still busted.”

His brow knits. “Look, I’m *trying* to apologize—”

“Well, try fucking harder. I don’t even have a drink yet.”

Roman scowls. “Shit, sorry.”

I stand there watching in amusement as he turns and easily pushes his way to the bar. A minute later he's back, holding two shots.

“Thanks,” I mutter, taking the glass of what smells like vodka. I’ve barely brought it to my nose before Roman has knocked his back in one go.

I eye him.

“Should you be doing that?”

He looks at me with confusion. “It’s a *bar*.”

“No, I mean…” I take in the way he’s swaying a little bit. The flush on his face.

“You’ve already had a few, yeah?” I growl.

Roman scowls ”And?”

“No and. Just asking.”

“It’s the weekend,” he shrugs. “I’m having fun.”

“Clearly.”

He eyes my shot, and a crazy part of me wonders if he’s seriously contemplating asking me if I’m going to drink it or not, so that *he* can.

I down it, to make sure he doesn’t.

“Be right back..”

“Rom—”

He’s already gone, shoving back to the bar like a bull in a china shop. A minute later, he comes back with a beer for each of us.

I take one, and he clinks his bottle to mine. “So…we good?”

I peer at him closely. “Not quite.”

He looks puzzled. “I—”

“I’m going to ask you something,” I continue evenly. “And I want a straight answer, pun one hundred percent not intended.”

Roman smirks. “Okay…”

His eyes widen a little as I step right into his personal space and lean close, my mouth brushing past his ear.

“How many times over the last few days did that big, gorgeous cock of yours get hard thinking about the steam room?”

Roman turns bright red and takes a huge swig of beer.

“Val, I’m not—”

“Don’t even say it,” I groan, rolling my eyes. “I hate to break it to you, but jerking a guy off and letting him lick your and his cum off your still-hard dick before he kisses you is *all fucking sorts of gay*, my friend.”

Roman’s mouth purses, his throat working overtime as he swallows heavily. His bottom lip retreats between his teeth, and fucking hell, it takes *everything* not to crush my mouth to his, to claim that lip with my teeth.

Also, he *needs* to stop staring at me like that. It’s clear he’s drunk. But he’s not *that* drunk. Like, this isn’t “fucked up Roman is out of his mind, and pushing the issue is super questionable” territory.

But he *is* drunk enough that he’s tiptoeing right up to that line in the sand that he’s drawn across his sexuality.

Roman clears his throat. “I… I just wanted to apologize.”

I exhale. “It’s cool. I know it was an accident.”

He half smiles, which is seriously fucking adorable.

“So… We're good now?”

I shrug. “I guess.”

He frowns. “That doesn’t sound like a yes.”

No shit, Sherlock.

Roman swallows heavily, that fucking lip of his sinking back between his teeth.

“Tell me…” He hesitates. “Tell me what I can do to make it better.”

My pulse thuds in my ears. My entire body hums with ravenous energy.

He needs to stop looking at me like that.

And he *definitely* needs to stop saying shit like that to me in that needy, begging voice.

“Tell me what—”

“Take off your belt.”

Roman’s entire body tenses—well, except for his eyes, which widen, and his mouth, which falls open a bit.

He takes a heavy drink of beer. “What?”

He’s trembling a little as I step closer to him, looking him dead in the eye as I pluck the beer from his hand and turn, putting it and mine on the table beside us.

“You heard me. Take off your belt, and give it to me.”

He hesitates another few seconds, his chest rising and falling, his eyes flitting over mine. Then he nods and swallows heavily.

“*Okay*.”

I bite back a groan as he reaches down and undoes his black leather belt. He slides it off his black dress slacks, hesitates for half a second, then hands it to me.

“Turn around. Face the table,” I murmur.

Roman’s face heats.

“W-what?”

His breath catches sharply as I step even closer, my gaze never leaving his.

“*Turn around*, face the table, and put your fucking hands behind your back. *Now*.”

There’s no hesitation this time. Fuck me, there’s an *eagerness* as he trembles and turns to face the high-top.

“Hands…” I growl.

He nods, taking a shaky breath before slipping his hands to the small of his back, right above his delectable ass.

Without preamble, I take the belt, loop it around his crossed wrists, then pull it tight.

And the motherfucker *whimpers*.

He doesn't gasp, or grunt, or shift uncomfortably as he fights it.

He goddamn *whimpers*.

A deviously dark smile creeps over my mouth as I lean into him, relishing the way he shivers when he feels me press to his back, and the way his breath hitches again when my mouth moves to hover near his ear.

“You like to give up control,” I growl into his ear.

Roman stiffens, his breath turning choked and haggard. “N-no, I don’t.”

“Allow me to introduce you to four seconds ago, when you *moaned* when I pinned your arms and took away your control.”

His back muscles flex. “I—I mean… I don’t *normally*…I don’t—”

I grab the end of the belt and tug, tightening it even more around his wrists.

And sweet baby Jesus, the man *moans* again—this needy, achy, *sexy* sound that immediately has my cock hard as fucking steel and throbbing in my pants.

“You’re the one who's always in control, aren’t you,” I murmur into his ear. I give the belt another quick tug, and a whimper hums in his throat.

“Roman…?”

“*Yes*,” he breathes heavily, his broad chest rising and falling.

“You’re the *top* in all of your fake relationships with girls, aren’t you?”

He swallows, half turning his head to glance at me.

“Aren’t all guys tops?”

Oh, you sweet summer child.

“Not always. But, in hetero relationships…yeah, usually.”

I tug again, relishing the sound that tumbles from his quivering mouth.

“When you’re with a girl,” I growl into his ear. “Are you the dominant one?”

He nods quickly. “*Yes*,” he breathes shakily.

“Do you enjoy it?”

Roman sucks on his lip again. “I…don’t know? Yes?”

“So convincing,” I snicker.

I yank his belt again, dragging another *ultra*-satisfying moan from his throat.

“I think you crave a little dominance.” I chuckle darkly as I lean over and drag my tongue up the side of his neck before nipping at his earlobe. “*Such* a bottom.”

Roman’s brow furrows deeply. He turns, his arms still bound behind his back, his eyes wide as they stare into mine with the lights and the music still pounding around us. His throat bobs before he opens his mouth.

“That’s…” He shivers. “I mean, bottom means…”

“It means you’re the one *getting fucked*,” I growl.

Roman shivers, his chest still rising and falling quickly and a slightly panicked expression on his face.

Okay, I’ve tortured him enough…for now. Last thing I need is a closet case having a fucking panic attack in the middle of the club.

Wordlessly, I turn him around, loosen and slip off the belt, then hand it to him before I pat him on the chest.

“Are we…good?” he murmurs.

“Mmm… Still thinking about that.”

I simply *cannot* resist the urge to fuck with this guy.

“In the meantime,” I add, “I’m going to go use the men's room. Don’t go anywhere, wreckage. I’m having way too much fun with you.”

I turn without another word. That lost expression on his face has me *way* harder than it should, and if he wants to make it home tonight *without* me kissing the fuck out of him in front of everyone, I need to get out of here.

The regular bathrooms are a shitshow, this being a popular club on a Friday night. Luckily, the VIP ones are *much* nicer.

So that's where I go, giving our table and clingy, pathetic Gerard a wide berth.

Once there, I run my hands under cold water and splash a little on my face. I look up into the mirror, forcing my breathing to calm as adrenaline and hunger roar inside me.

What the fuck is he doing?

He's playing with fucking fire, is what he's doing. If he keeps looking at me like that, and *moaning* like that, I will *not* be able to stop whatever comes next.

"Whatever" obviously meaning "me slamming him up against the nearest wall or over the closest available flat surface and fucking the confusion right out of—"

The bathroom door opens behind me. And when I look up, my cock jumps when my eyes meet Roman's in the mirror.

He looks so unsure. A little drunk, and nervous. A whole lotta *sexy*.

"I—" He breathes in and out heavily as I turn to face him. "I don't…I mean…"

"*Well, well, well*," I murmur quietly. "Look who got *curious*."

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13

ROMAN

Three hours earlier:

THE IMPACT of the hit explodes up my arm, thundering through my shoulder as my fist connects with the practice bag. I dodge left, feinting another hook to my imaginary opponent as I duck, weave, then go on the attack again.

Pound. Pound. POUND.

Ideally, I should be taking out my pent-up energy and snarling darkness on a real opponent at one of the underground fights I go to. That's historically how I've blown off steam, how I've battened down the corruption inside of me—that fucking flaw that makes me so weak at times.

And yes, I'm aware of how fucked up it is to call whatever it is that rises up inside me when I'm around Val *a flaw*, or *corruption*.

But hey. Welcome to the wonderful world of self-loathing.

I halt myself mid-swing, letting my fist barely tap the bag before I slump against it, my arms wrapped around it. My chest heaves with my labored breath, sweat running in rivulets down my bare back and arms.

There are so many things I want to tell myself. So many tried and true mantras that I've repeated hundreds of times.

I’m not gay.

I’m not attracted to men.

I fucking like women.

I’m straight.

But every single one of them, just like all my strength, power and control, shatter to nothing whenever I’m around that motherfucker.

Whenever I even *think* of him.

My eyes squeeze shut, and I grit my teeth.

It’s getting harder and harder to look at myself in the mirror and try to tell myself that I’m not into men when lurid, vivid images of what happened the other day keep roaring through my head and turning my world upside down.

Turning my blood to fire.

Turning my cock to steel.

Because the fucked-up reality is that I fucking *loved it*.

A lot.

I came harder with Val’s hand around my dick than I have *ever* come before, either by myself or with a woman.

It was Val, not me, I tried to tell myself. It was his constant attention on me.

His fault I came so fucking hard jerking his dick while he jerked mine.

His fault I came a second time with his lips wrapped around my cock, so hard that I almost blacked out.

The other day, after what happened, and after he ignored my messages trying to apologize for accidentally smacking him—and, well, for freaking out a little—I decided I needed to “course correct”.

I ended up calling Tiffany, one of my very, *very* few “repeats”. We’ve hooked up dozens of times in the past: I call her when I’m fucked up, she

comes over or tells me where to find her, we fuck, often without even really getting undressed, and then either I leave or she does immediately after. We don't talk about our lives, or what we're thinking or feeling. In fact, I'm not sure we've ever had what you could call a conversation.

It's perfect.

And *that*, I reasoned, was exactly what I needed. So I called her—drunk, of course—and invited her over to my place. Except the second she walked in the door, and slipped off her jacket, and winked as she twirled and showed me the lacy, see-through lingerie underneath…I was immediately disinterested.

Completely.

All the womanly aspects of her that I had buried myself in before—the big, full tits, the round hips, the long, silky hair, the pouty lips…

They were a fucking *turnoff*. Like legit a total erection killer.

It was like she was too *soft*. Too curvy. Too weak. Too…*feminine*.

Fucking HELL.

I don't even want to say it in my own head, but I know what was missing, and what wasn't there that *would* have made me hard.

Rough edges. Sharp lines. Muscles and grooves. A stubbled jaw. Hard, glinting eyes. An even harder cock.

Jesus.

I exhale again, grunting as I give the practice bag a cheap shot to its kidneys and then turn to grab some water. I yank off my gloves, tossing them aside as I pick up the bottle.

I've considered the possibility of erectile dysfunction. Or low testosterone?

Yeah, no. Those fly out the window when I wake up in the middle of the night from lurid dreams involving *Val* stroking my cock. Dropping to his knees and looking up at me, wrapping his lips around my swollen dick. Forcing *me* to *mine*…

I shiver and swallow.

Yeah, that's a no to low T or my dick not working. Because waking up from *those* dreams, I'm hard enough to bend steel.

…Hard, twitching, and fucking leaking precum to the point where finishing myself off isn't even an option, it's fucking *mandatory*.

I take another gulp of water and glance at my phone. There's no notifications on the screen, but I open it and check my messages anyway.

Nothing from him.

Not. At. All.

Fuck.

"You win?"

I startle, then turn with a grin as Stepan walks into the gym at my father's house.

Yes, I still have my membership at Equilibrium.

No, I haven't been able to set foot in the place after the events of a few days ago.

"Meh, a draw," I shrug, nodding at the practice bag. "Motherfucker has a sick left hook."

"Fucking southpaws," Stepan grins. "Get you every time."

Then he frowns. "Don't you usually work out at that fancy Midtown place? With the hot girls working the front desk and that sweet steam room?"

I swallow uncomfortably. "Uh-huh," I grunt.

He shrugs. "Nothing against your father's gym, but—"

"They're doing some renovations," I lie.

"Ahh," Stepan nods and then clears his throat. "Well, I hate to break things up before the rematch with the southpaw, but your father wants to see you upstairs."

I catch the t-shirt that Stepan throws at me.

“About?”

“*I* don’t know, Roman,” he sighs. “Probably nothing to do with your eventual ascension to the throne, including the seat at the Iron Table. I’m sure he just wants to know how your day is going and ask if you caught the Islanders game last night.”

I frown as I tug on the shirt. “Joke's on him. I don’t watch hockey.”

Stepan shakes his head. “Criminal, how America has turned the sons of so many great Russian *pakhans* off the glorious sport of ice hockey.”

“It’s boring and cold. If I want to watch fights, I’ll watch boxing, where they actually know how to throw a punch.”

He mutters in Russian. “Boring? Hockey is the sport of warriors. It’s what turns boys into men. It makes you strong! Tough!”

I chuckle. “That’s what football is for, Stepan.”

He dismisses me with a wave. “Bah—American football. No footwork involved, and the game stops every three goddamn seconds.” He grins at me. “Shall I take you to your father now?”

“By all means.”

* * *

“WE NEED to move up the timeline.”

It’s me, Stepan, five of my father’s top *avtoritets*, and Pavel himself. He scowls, drumming on his desk with one hand while bringing the crystal tumbler of vodka to his lips with the other.

“I can reach out to Lukashov and see…” Stepan begins slowly.

“Do it,” my father grunts. “I want this marriage signed and sealed before Vaughn fucking Bancroft has Cosimo wrapped around his goddamn finger.”

“Sangrini is famously impartial though, no?” Boris, one of my father’s captains, ventures. “And he has no children of his own. The way to an alliance with him is through his goddaughter Dasha,” he shrugs. “And *pakhan*, you have that buttoned up, eh?” He grins and reaches over to pat me heavily on the shoulder. “Not that Roman here is going to be suffering, hmm?”

He holds his hands out in front of his chest like he’s squeezing a huge pair of tits, and the room, predictably, erupts in laughter.

My father chuckles, but then shakes his head. “Who knows. Maybe Cosimo…you know…” he grins and holds up a limp wrist. “Is a *pidoraz*, eh?”

The captains hoot to each other, mimicking my father’s limp-wrist and his vulgar gay slur.

“You think Cosimo likes the boys, eh, boss?” Andrey, another captain, asks with a chuckle.

“Who knows,” Papa shrugs. “But… That Vaughn is a sneaky little motherfucker. If Cosimo is…” He lifts a limp wrist again. “Maybe Vaughn decides to be a *pidoraz* too and fuck Cosimo up the ass, eh?”

More hoots and hollers. I force a strangled smile to my face.

My father suddenly scowls and swears in Russian. “Vaughn might not be a *pidoraz*,” he grunts, “but his brother is. The sissy that dances with my Evelina.”

My jaw suddenly tenses so hard that my teeth hurt. My hand curls to a fist on the armrest of my chair and my drink turns acrid in my mouth when I take a sip.

Dad frowns. “Stepan.”

“Boss?”

“Look into it.”

Stepan’s brow furrows. “Into…?”

“Cosimo. I want to know if he takes it up the ass.”

Stepan looks mildly amused as he lifts a brow. “Boss, I’m fairly certain he likes women…”

So am I, and I barely know the guy. But he’s wealthy beyond belief and powerful beyond comprehension. He also isn’t part of the old-school circle jerk of toxic masculinity that the Bratva tends to be. If he was gay, there’s literally no reason Cosimo would feel the need to hide it, or mask it behind the women he’s frequently spotted with in exotic locales.

“Well, find out for sure,” Papa snaps. “Immediately.”

“*Da, pakhan,*” Stepan nods curtly.

“Good. Although, fuck, if he is…” Papa chuckles. “We’re *fucked*. It’s not like we’ll find a butt-boy in the Bratva to go fuck him like a little sissy bitch.”

The captains erupt in laughter. Stepan smiles automatically and glances at me, shrugging.

When the meeting is over, Papa stops me.

“Don't go yet, Roman.”

“Of course, Papa.”

He pours us both another drink and passes mine to me before he takes a seat behind his desk again.

“Take down this address.”

I frown, nodding. Papa rattles off an address in Bay Ridge, which I type into a note on my phone.

“What is this?”

“A new safe house. Off the books, for when I want *nobody* to know what I’m doing.” Papa clears his throat. “We’re going to discuss some potential very good news about the Norton Avenue project.”

My brows arch.

Bane's father and mine are *heavily*, and jointly, invested in massive construction project in Queens: a high-rise that'll include a hotel, luxury apartments, high-end shopping, and fine dining.

"How good of news?"

Papa clears his throat as he leans forward. "Tell no one what I'm about to tell you."

I nod.

"We might get that casino after all."

I whistle lowly. *Fuck*, that's a big deal. The project as-is is going be a money-piñata for both families. But on top of what they're already planning, my father pushed *hard* for a luxury, high-rollers casino on the top four floors.

The only problem there is that New York *does not* like giving out gaming licenses. Especially not to notorious Russian mobsters.

"I may have a found a way, Roman," Papa grins darkly. "A gaming commissioner with some…*personal* pressure points. But I need to get Nikolai on board. He's been against this from the start for some fucking reason."

I nod. "That's…huge."

"*Da*," he grunts. "Listen, Roman…" he eyes me. "When I get Nikolai on board with this, and we move forward." He raps his knuckles on the desk and then points at me. "I want *you* to be in charge of securing the gaming license from this commissioner, yes?"

I hold back a smile. "Of course, Papa."

My father is, for lack of a better word, an asshole. I'm not blind to that: it's not like the assholery is leveled solely at other people. I get the full brunt of it all the time.

But sometimes, when he talks about the future, about *me* taking over the throne… I don't know, I get the faintest whiff of a sense of pride in me from him, and I hold onto it as tightly as I can.

“Excellent.” He clears his throat and peers a little closer at me. “So—was it good?”

I frown as I take a sip of my drink. “Was what good?”

“Your rendezvous the other day.”

For a second, my entire body goes numb and cold. Like a knife made of ice has just been plunged into my heart. I stare at him, my face pale.

Papa chuckles. “That girl. Tiffany, right?”

Jesus Christ.

I exhale slowly, blinking as my chest thaws a little. He’s not talking about Val in the steam room.

Fuck…

“What?” I choke out.

Papa chuckles. “My men at the front door of your building told me she was over the other night.” He grins and winks at me. “You have fun?”

I take another sip, my brow furrowing. “Your men are spying on me now?”

Papa rolls his eyes. “So sensitive. They weren’t spying. They were *jealous*!” he roars, laughing. “Probably thought I’d be proud, hearing that my boy is out there fucking sexy girls like that, eh?”

He chuckles, lifting his glass to me in a toast.

“But…” His brow furrows. “You need to be smarter about it. Arranged or not, Dasha is going to be your wife soon, *da*? And her papa…” His lips thin. “Perhaps less excited than me to learn about other girls sharing your bed.”

I exhale slowly, dipping my chin. “Understood. It won’t happen again.”

“It can happen again, you just need to be smarter about it,” he growls. “You think I wasn’t sticking my dick anywhere I could when your mother was still around?”

My eyes narrow and my jaw tightens, but he doesn't see it. Or if he does, he doesn't care. Instead, he laughs and slaps the table.

"You just need to be *sneakier*, Roman, okay?"

"*Da*, Papa," I murmur.

He nods, but then he scowls. "And when you're with your bride-to-be?" His scowl deepens as he jabs a finger at me. "Do better. That party I threw… You were a disgrace. You barely spoke to her, you were never near her. You even fucking disappeared for a while. What, fucking one of the waitresses?" He scoffs. "Be better, boy."

I dip my chin. "I will, Papa."

"You'd fucking better be. She'll be your wife, and she'll give you the heir that comes *after* you to continue our bloodline!"

Papa jabs a finger at me again.

"Play your part, boy. Don't disappoint me."

* * *

It's dark as I stalk around the side of the pool in Papa's back yard, drink in one hand, phone in the other. The keys to my Lamborghini jangle in my pocket as I contemplate what I'm doing tonight.

A scowl plasters my face, but it's not because of my father's bullshit. I'm used to it. I've dealt with his "legacy and bloodline" crap my whole life, not to mention his constant see-sawing between being my "buddy" and talking about girls as if we're pals, and then lording his power over me and reminding me not to fuck up.

It all slides right off me.

My face darkens.

Could have done without the fucking *pidoraz* comments, though.

I exhale and then knock back some of the vodka in my glass.

My phone suddenly dings, and my heart jumps into my throat. But when I look at it *way* too quickly, my pulse slows again.

It's not him. The one that *still* hasn't messaged me back. It's Brooklyn.

BROOKLYN

Roman! What are you doing? We're all at Doomsday. Come! I miss youuuu!

I smile quietly.

I'm not historically one for female friends, especially if they're through my sister. I'm a "guy's guy": football, boxing, girls, cars…that kind of shit. But Brooklyn and I have an interesting, and honestly *great* friendship. And a few months back, we crashed together in a fucked-up way that…

Well, quite possibly saved my life.

I swallow as I glance down at the pool, the underwater lights casting an aquamarine glow over me and the trees.

I know I drink too much. Sometimes, it's just because I get caught up in the night and in having a good time. But others, it's because the darkness and the warring pieces of me pulling me apart get to be too much.

That was the case that night.

Papa was out of town, and Evie and I decided to throw a party at the house. She and her friends mostly did their own thing, and me and my buddies did ours. But then it got late, Evie's friends went home or out to more bars, my sister went to bed I think, and my friends took off.

I was drunk. Scratch that. I was *fucked up*.

Confused.

Lonely.

And…I don't know. Twisted up inside.

I barely remember downloading Grindr, the gay hookup app. I vaguely remember telling myself it was a mistake. That this wasn't me.

That I wasn’t gay.

But suddenly there I was sitting on the edge of the pool, wasted, alone, and uploading a photo of my bare torso to my profile.

I got a reply in *seconds*.

“Hey baby, need someone to throat your fat dick tonight?”

As far as I know, that’s the only time I’ve had a panic attack. A full-blown *meltdown*.

It was too real. Like the war between the me I told myself I was and the me I was always burying came to a violent confrontation.

Then I blacked out, or…something.

And at some point, I became aware of someone screaming my name and dragging me out of the shallow end of the pool.

Brooklyn.

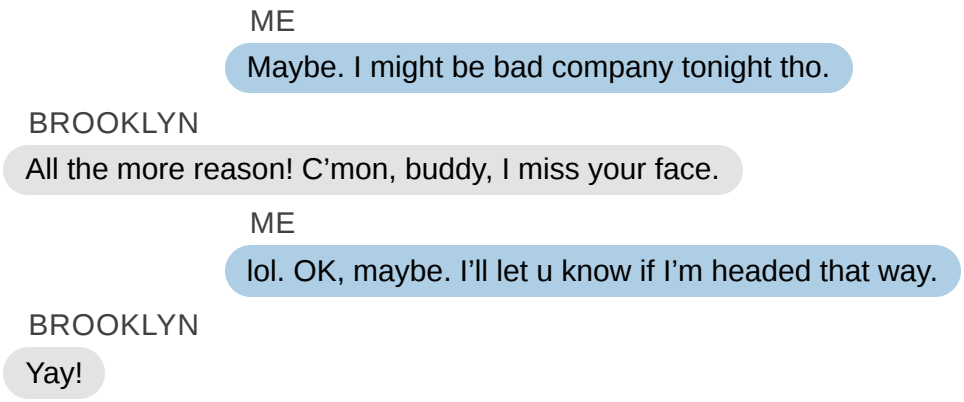
Brooklyn, who for some unknown reason was still at the house.

Brooklyn, who definitely saw the open Grindr app on my phone.

Brooklyn, who had vomit on her shirt and dropped a bottle of my dad’s prescription oxycodone when she dragged me out of the pool.

Neither of us pushed the other for answers. But there was something unspoken that night: we’d both chosen to live another day.

And I will forever—platonically—love her for that.


ME
Maybe. I might be bad company tonight tho.
BROOKLYN
All the more reason! C’mon, buddy, I miss your face.
ME
lol. OK, maybe. I’ll let u know if I’m headed that way.
BROOKLYN
Yay!

“There you are.”

I blink, turning and feeling my brows arch when I see my sister. She grins, blushing a little as she looks down at her outfit. “Too over the top?”

From a normal human perspective? No.

From an overprotective big brother perspective? Fuck yes.

My brows knit. “You going out?”

She nods. “Yeah, I’m going to go join the girls. It’s not too much?”

“It’s definitely too much.”

She rolls her eyes. “I’m asking you not as my big brother.”

I sigh. “You look great,” I mumble begrudgingly. “Where are you going?”

“Doomsday, where else?”

Right. Brooklyn literally just texted me that. Honestly, if that's where they’re going I feel better about it. Doomsday gets wild, but the whole security staff there knows who my sister is—enough that if any guy there tries getting shitty, he’ll have his arms broken and his ass tied to a chair in the basement in seconds, waiting for *me* to get there to ask him what the fuck he thought he was doing being a dick to my sister.

I scowl as I remember something.

…I still haven’t talked to Evie about that convo I saw on her phone.

Then again, *she* hasn’t mentioned shit to me about it suddenly being deleted and her profile being set to private after I was in her room.

…Maybe this is a mutual agreement never to mention it, ever. Honestly, that sounds like the best course of action. I don’t have slightest fucking clue how to ask my sweet, innocent sister what the fuck she was doing on a kink website arranging to meet a fucking stranger in the woods for sex.

Fuck. Maybe I need to accept that my “little sister” is a twenty-one-year-old woman capable of making her own choices.

“So, *not* too much.”

I shake my head. “You look great, Eves.”

She beams. “Thanks. The girls are trying to get me to loosen up a little.”

“Well, just don’t lose who you are in the process,” I smile.

She nods. Then she clears her throat. “Hey, two questions. Are you busy right now, and how drunk are you?”

I shrug. “Not busy, and this is only my second.”

She gives me the big cheesy grin that means she needs a favor.

“Spill it,” I sigh, chuckling.

“Can you give me a ride to Doomsday? *Puh-lease*?”

“Why me? You have a highly protective Russian mobster father who literally has a whole *army* at his disposal to drive you anywhere.”

Evie shrugs. “Well, for one, you have a sweet car. And Papa’s men….” She pouts. “They’re creepy and scary.”

I chuckle. “That’s the point, Evie. They’re also loyal enough to *die* to protect you.”

“Still creepy and scary.”

“Stepan isn’t.”

Evie sighs. “Stepan is the greatest. But he’s also a pay grade or five above driving me to clubs.” She gives me the look that’s basically gotten me to do her bidding since the day she was born. “*Please*, Rome?”

I exhale heavily and wrap an arm around her shoulder. “*Okay*. Yes.”

“Thank you!” she squeals.

“Who all’s going to be there?”

“Oh,” she shrugs. “The girls. Miguel. James.”

I’ve vetted every guy at the Zakharova, gay or straight. I mean, come on: my sister spends like eighty hours a week with these people.

Miguel and James are both fine in my books. Miguel has a girlfriend he’s devoted to; James is gay and also in a committed relationship.

“Oh, and Val. Obviously.”

My jaw tightens.

“Ooo, I forgot something inside!” She turns, shoving her clutch and her phone into my hands. “Can you hold these for a sec? Thanks!”

Then she's off in a pink tornado to get whatever she forgot.

I stare at her phone for all of two seconds before I open it, click on Val’s name, and save his number—which he's never given me—in my contacts.

A minute later, Evie comes back out. “Ready to go?”

“*Yup*.”

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14

VAL

I TURN to face him in the men's room, my ears thudding.

Fuck, he looks like a lost lamb. A huge, built-like-a-brick-house, swarthy, sexy as fuck *lamb*.

The juxtaposition of it all hits me again: the six-and-a-half-foot tall, thickly muscled, ultra-masculine Bratva heir who tussles in underground fight clubs and looks like he commits murder before breakfast…

…Contrasted against that hungry, subby look in his eyes when he gazes at me like he desperately wants me—*needs me*—to take away the last of his control.

To tell him exactly what to do.

To tell him what a good boy he is.

But I *cannot* do the whiplashing back and forth any longer: one minute, he's putty in my hand, whimpering and moaning and coming all over himself. The next, that self-hating, closeted asshole part of him comes out swinging, and we go right back to square fucking one.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Roman?"

His throat works up and down, his mouth tight as he eyes me.

"I—I don't know."

I'm *so* close to telling him to fuck off and figure it out on his own.

Not because I *want* him to get away from me. I don't, not at all. But I can't be his fucking guide through this.

It's the reason I'm alone. The reason I enjoy casual, fun, and temporary. I'm incapable of anything more than that, whether it's because of my childhood in the brutal foster care system, or the monsters in the dark, or my addict, derelict parents, or even that maybe something got knocked loose in my head the day I lost my memories.

But when he looks at me with such fucking *need* in his eyes, like he's truly lost in the woods, and I might be his only guide through the trees, and when he sucks his lip between his teeth and bites down just so?

I'm fucking captive.

Disarmed. *Wrecked*.

Part of me hopes that he spooks, turns, and *runs the fuck away* when I start to move toward him. I want to break his spell, to slap some common sense into him and maybe a decision that his best option is to be what they—and he—want him to be.

The tough, macho bratva heir.

One that isn't confused.

Who's every inch what he's "supposed" to be: in control, engaged to a woman, and *straight*, without any doubts or confusion on the subject.

But the motherfucker doesn't bolt. He just fucking stands there, staring at me, eyes wide, teeth worrying his full lower lip in a way that makes my pulse roar.

He takes a shaky, nervous breath as I move closer, until I'm standing right in front of him, looking him in the eye as he looks right back at me with that desperately yearning little look.

I breathe in his scent: citrus and bergamot, with a clean, masculine note swirling through it that ensnares me. I don't even realize my hand has lifted until my fingers are curling into the collar of his shirt.

A choked sound tumbles from his throat.

You never should have followed me in here, wreckage, I want to scream in his face. *You won't leave here the same as when you walked in*.

Roman's breath catches, his eyes bulging wide as I drag him back toward one of the stalls. He shuffles in after me until we're both inside, and I'm shutting and locking the door.

The Earth stops rotating as we stand there frozen, staring each other in the eye, breathing each other's air, our bodies pressed tight together.

I can feel his pulse. Feel the hum of his nerves and the way he trembles.

The way he aches for this.

The way his big cock has swelled so hard in his pants that I feel it twitch against mine.

"Tell me to take control, Roman," I growl quietly. "*Do it*. Tell me to fucking take control like we both know you want me to."

Roman *moans*.

"*Please*," he chokes, breathing heavily, his muscled chest rising and falling. "Val—"

"Use your fucking words like a good boy."

He groans, his breath catching in his throat. His eyes flit across my face, his lips opening and closing. "*Please take control*," he finally croaks.

Dark, vicious, all-consuming thunder rumbles inside me.

I'm going to fucking *ruin* this man.

"Take your belt off again."

He sharply sucks in his breath and goes still, his eyes bulging. I smirk as I lean right into his space, breathing in the scent of his skin and the pure need radiating off him.

"*Now*," I growl darkly.

Roman’s hands drop to his belt. They shake with nerves or maybe excitement as he quickly unbuckles it and yanks it out of the loops of his pants before handing it to me.

I’m already so fucking hard it hurts.

“On your knees.”

Power surges through me, and dark, needy desire burns into my brain when I see the utter capitulation in his eyes.

I’m not usually this commanding, this dominant. But the deeper we get, I'm realizing that Roman is even more submissive than I originally thought.

More eager. Starving desperately for this *thing* he’s denied himself.

The needier and subbier and more lost he looks, the more I want to fucking *consume him*.

Capture him.

Bend him over right here, right now, and make him shake, whimper, beg, and quiver when I fuck him so hard he sees *God*.

But when I see Roman’s throat bob, and the vein in his temple pulse, and then watch him slowly, unblinkingly, drop to his knees in front of me?

It's my turn to be well and truly lost.

I look down at him, getting fucking *high* off the way he looks up at me with eager, desperate submission in his gaze.

“Take out my cock.”

Roman’s eyes bulge, and his mouth falls open a little.

“Be a good boy, open my pants, and *take out my cock*,” I say again. “I’m so fucking hard for you, wreckage.”

I almost think I’ve gone too far, that I’ve pushed beyond what he’s capable of.

But then, shockingly, he lifts his hands and brings them, trembling, to my belt. His eyes glazed over, he tugs it open, then undoes the button on my pants. His big, tattooed hands drag lightly over my bulge as he fingers my zipper.

He looks up at me briefly, his eyes wide, before he drops his gaze again.

The zipper goes down, and he starts to pull my pants open. I watch, my pulse roaring, as he slips that damned bottom lip back between his teeth and his fingers slide to the waist of my boxers.

“Yeah, just like that,” I growl as his fingers slip inside the waistband.

I watch his hands tremble as he slowly lowers them, sliding the fabric past my lower abs, exposing the line of hair trailing down.

The grooves of my v-lines, the phoenix tattoo on my right hip.

His eyes *stare* at my body as he slowly reveals it, like he’s utterly fascinated and captivated by it.

The waistband slides down to the base of my swollen cock and the short, trimmed hair there, together with his gaze.

He keeps pulling, lower and lower, his eyes getting wider and his mouth falling even more open as inch after inch of my thick cock comes into view.

He tugs my boxers down the rest of the way, sliding the waistband over my swollen head and letting my cock spring free. Roman groans—fucking *groans*, eagerly, hungrily—when my dick bobs right in front of his little-lost-lamb face.

“Stroke it,” I murmur darkly. “Stroke it like a good boy. Like you’d want that gorgeous dick of *yours* stroked, remember?”

I expect hesitation and slow, tentative movements. Instead, Roman’s big hand instantly raises, and when his tattooed fingers wrap around my cock, he lets out this deep “*uhnnngh*” sound that makes my balls twitch.

He squeezes my dick, the fingers of his large hand not even touching as they curl around my shaft, which is such an outrageously hot visual that my abs clench.

He starts to move his hand, pumping back and forth, jerking me off in front of his big, dark eyes.

“What…” His voice breaks a little as he trembles. “What next?” he growls quietly, his voice low and husky.

“Keep stroking. Open your mouth, stick out your tongue, and run it over my head while you do.”

That sexy fucking “*uhnnngh*” sound falls from his throat again. There’s little hesitation, his breath quick and shallow, teasing soft and warm over my leaking crown.

He wets his lips, just *staring* at my cock with a reverence that makes me want to pull him up and kiss the fuck out of him.

But before I can do that, Roman lowers his mouth, sticks his tongue out, and drags it slowly over my cock.

Fuck. Me.

I hiss, grunting and letting my head drop back as Roman’s warm, wet tongue swirls over my head. He drags it tentatively over the hole at the tip, and when I growl, and my dick twitches and leaks precum onto his tongue, the man fucking *whimpers*.

Oh, I’m going to enjoy this.

Teaching him.

Training him.

Owning him.

Mine.

“Open your mouth, wreckage,” I growl through clenched teeth as his tongue sends ripples of pleasure through my belly. “Open your mouth and put your hands over your head.”

He looks up at me, shivering, questions in his hooded eyes. When I just nod, he flushes and slowly does as he’s told. His arms raise, hands moving over his head.

“Cross them at the wrist.”

Blood hums in my ears, my muscles twitching with a consuming need. My cock pulses, precum dripping from the swollen head as I loop Roman’s belt around his wrists and pull it tight. Roman shivers, and when I give the belt a sharp yank, a moan spills from his throat.

“This is what you’ve been waiting for, isn’t it,” I growl. “For me to *take* what I want. Your control. Your submission. Your fucking *mouth*.”

Roman’s muscled thighs squeeze together, and I groan, seeing the *huge* bulge in his pants as he squirms like my greedy little cock slut.

“Open,” I command.

Like I said, I’m usually a top. But this is quickly moving past anything I “usually” am.

And it’s all. His. Fault.

He makes me want to break him, utterly. To take full control and fucking *use* him. And every step I take further into that dark, consuming place in my head, he’s clearly eager to follow me.

Roman's mouth opens, and he chokes out a gasp as I cinch the belt tight, keeping his hands crossed above his head as he looks up at me with those big, sexy eyes. I roll my hips forward, and when my thick head glides between his lips and sinks into his mouth, *Roman* moans even before I do.

Jesus fuck.

I can feel my size forcing his mouth to stretch wide, but he does it *so fucking willingly*…

I drown in the heat of his mouth as I choke back a groan.

Holy shit.

His jaw widens, and when his lips wrap around my swollen crown, Roman groans again—an eager, loud hum that sends vibrations through my dick. His tongue swirls around my head, teasing the hole at the tip and making my precum leak all over his tongue.

No. We’re past *teasing* now.

I tug at the belt, stretching his arms above his head. He whimpers when I press my fist to the wall, pinning his arms in place. He hums even louder around my dick, fluttering his tongue over the slit.

I want more. I fucking *need* more.

“Open wide, wreckage,” I grit through my teeth. “I’m going to *fuck* this greedy little mouth of yours now.”

His eyes snap to mine. For half a second, they blaze with what I can only think are the last shreds of that stupid fucking voice inside him desperately trying to hang on to some semblance of heterosexuality. The last remnants that hesitate at the notion of being “fucked” in any capacity.

But then, just as quickly as the look flashes in his eyes, I see it melt away. It's as if the more I push him and take away his control, the stronger, wilder and more powerful his need for me becomes.

Roman moans deeply, and when I rock my hips and slide my dick deeper into his mouth, he groans even louder. I do the same, my jaw tight, my eyes locked with his as he takes my cock into the back of his throat like a fucking greedy slut.

I hiss and draw back, watching his lips eagerly trying to keep me inside his mouth, my shaft glistening with his spit. I grunt and thrust right back in, burying myself in the back of his throat, my dick throbbing at the sight of his saliva dripping out the corners of his mouth.

I pull the belt tighter, yanking his arms even higher, forcing him more into a position of submission. When his eyes lock with mine again, they’re on fucking *fire* with raw, dark, need. His hands stretch up. Not fighting me. *Reaching* for me.

What the *fuck*.

A possessive wildness takes hold of me. I keep the belt tight but twist my wrists at the same time, reaching down, letting my fingers tangle with his.

Holy shit.

He grips me tighter, his eyes blazing as he groans around my swelling, pulsing cock.

"*Fuck*," I hiss. "Fuck, wreckage, your mouth feels so fucking good. You're swallowing my hard, thick cock like such a good boy."

My hips roll as I draw back, sliding my slick, glistening cock from his lips before thrusting right back in. I know he's never done this before and doesn't really know what he's doing. But fuck, his mouth feels *amazing*, and it's precisely that inexperience as he sucks and licks and whimpers around my dick that has my balls tightening and my eyes rolling back.

I groan and start to fuck his mouth harder, faster, pushing my head all the way to the back of his throat. I try to pull back when he gags a little, but Roman moans deeply and cranes his neck forward, as if wanting to keep me right where I am.

"*Fuck*, baby," I choke, my abs tightening as my cock thickens even more, impossibly hard, my sanity blurring at the edges as his sexy mouth milks my cock. "You're going to make me come. You're going to make me spill my cum all down your slutty throat."

It's the choked, haunted moan that he makes, his eyes rolling back, that pushes me over the edge. With a groan, I yank the belt tight, pushing my hips forward and pinning the back of his head to the stall wall. I thrust into his mouth, ramming my cock over his tongue over and over. Suddenly, I'm crashing into the abyss.

Roman moans deeply when my cock twitches and pulses, spilling hot cum over his tongue and down his hungry throat.

He's still trying to swallow when I yank him up by the belt around his wrists. He gasps when I slam him to the wall and crush my mouth to his. I kiss him fiercely, pushing my tongue into his mouth and scooping the cum off his tongue, passing it back and forth between us as his erection twitches against my thigh. I yank the belt from around his wrists, then slide my palm over his huge dick.

"I'm going to swallow you fucking whole—"

Suddenly, the bathroom door bangs open, and a choked, terrified sound gurgles in Roman's throat as he goes stock-still.

A girl’s and a guy’s voice tumble over us. “You’re so *bad*,” the girl whisper-giggles, click-clacking on her high heels into the men’s room.

“Fuck, baby, just needed to get you alone,” her partner groans, making her giggle again.

“Did you bring the coke?”

“Obviously.”

Roman remains still as a stone.

…But he’s also still fucking *hard* as a stone, and I can’t let that gorgeous dick of his be trapped in his pants any longer.

I kiss him again, relishing the frantic look in his eyes as I suck his bottom lip between my teeth. He starts to push me away, but I ignore him, sucking on his lip again before I release it.

“*They might hear—*”

“*Let them*,” I growl quietly against his lips.

Without another word, I drop to my knees. Roman’s mouth falls open, his eyes *wide* as he stares at me with a mix of terror and lust as I yank his pants open and reach inside. I groan quietly, wrapping my fingers around his cock and pumping it in my hand, feeling it pulse against my fingers as his silky steel erection twitches and jumps.

My fingers slide into his waistband, tugging his pants and his underwear down. He bites his lip as his cock springs out, bobbing heavily.

My turn.

Roman might be new to this.

…I’m fucking not.

So when I open my mouth, I mean business.

Roman chokes, slamming a forearm over his mouth and squeezing his eyes shut as his dick disappears into my mouth. I groan around him, slurping wetly and relaxing the muscles at the back of my throat to let him slide even deeper. I keep going, slowly feeling him inch into my throat until my nose is brushing the short hair below his abs.

Roman is shaking—literally fucking *shaking*—and his fingers are clawing at the stall walls as the couple outside giggles and snorts cocaine. I reach up and grab one of his hands, sliding his fingers into my hair until he tightens them to a fist.

Fast learner.

Good boy.

I swallow him a few more times. Then suddenly, a viciously fucked-up idea enters my head.

Roman doesn't realize what's happening until I slide his phone out of his pocket, my mouth still wrapped around his dick.

"*Val*!" he hisses, grabbing for it. I let him take it and slowly slide off his head, teasing the slit with my tongue.

"*Unlock it*," I mouth around his cock, sliding down to lick his heavy balls. Roman groans, panting heavily, dropping his head back against the wall.

"*Why—"* He barely stops his moan as I take one of his balls into my mouth.

"*Just do it*."

He does so, his hands shaking as I drag my tongue back up the underside of his beautiful dick. I pluck the phone from his trembling grip, and before he realizes what I'm doing, I'm tapping on the camera, switching to selfie mode, and inhaling half of his cock.

The phone clicks quietly as I take shot after shot of my lips wrapped tightly around his fat dick. I let my drool slide down his shaft, sticking my tongue out and tapping his head against it as I take another picture.

"*You're welcome*," I grin, shoving the phone back into his pocket before taking his cock deep in my throat.

Roman groans deeply, then I let him slip from my mouth with an audible pop. The giggling outside the stall goes quiet. Roman's face turns white, and he starts to push me away.

Yeah, no.

That's *not* fucking happening.

Instead, I groan loudly, wetly slurping on his dick and then taking him down my throat again.

"*Kurt!*" the girl outside the stall hisses, starting to giggle. "Kurt" snorts.

"Shit—sorry, guys," he chuckles. "We're out. Have fun."

Roman looks like he's about to have a heart attack. I choose to attribute that to my A-fucking-plus throat game, not his fear of almost being caught.

But once the bathroom door closes behind them, the brakes come off.

And I go *hard*.

I groan deeply, swallowing him to the hilt, squeezing him with my throat. Roman chokes out a cry of pleasure that ignites my fucking blood. He spasms, and his hands grab big fistfuls of my hair as I moan around his pulsing dick.

Suddenly, he's coming.

Hard.

I groan, swallowing as his dick starts to pump thick ropes of sweet, sticky cum down my throat, hollowing my cheeks and sucking his huge dick as it spurts again and again.

He looks like he's about to have a seizure when I finally pull my lips off him. I stand, and before he can say a thing, or question this, or suddenly decide he's fucking *straight* again, I grab his face and slam my mouth to his.

He let me kiss him with his mouth full of my cum before. But this time, when it's my mouth full of *his* load, he freezes, as if this is too much.

Yeah, too bad.

I grab his hair and yank back, making him let out a whimpering, mewling sound as I sear my lips to his and feed his cum to him.

"*Taste how fucking good you are*," I growl as our tongues tease and stroke.

He fights it at first, a little. But soon enough, his tongue is eagerly swirling with mine, licking and sucking his own sticky cum out of my mouth.

When I pull away, his face is red, and his eyes are wide. Haunted. He stares at me, his lips swollen from my kisses and glistening with cum.

"I—I've never—"

"I know," I murmur. "But you're pretty fucking good at it," I growl, sliding my hands over his delectable ass and pulling him to me. I kiss him again, relishing his moans when I do.

I finally let him go, both of us tucking ourselves back into our pants and fixing ourselves up. I sneak glances at him in the mirror as we wash up at the counter. He catches me, and I love the way his handsome, masculine face gets all pink and blushing when he does.

"*What*?" he growls, then gasps when I slide over to him, give his ass another firm grab, and kiss him hard.

"Nothing," I murmur against his mouth, grinning. "Just wondering when we can do that again."

He flushes deeper. "But…I mean…we just…"

"*I'm* ready for round two," I growl. "You?"

He doesn't immediately roll his eyes, or frown, or start going to the usual "I'm not gay" place.

"Well?"

His throat works. "*M-maybe*," he says quietly.

My dick swells instantly.

Fuck yeah.

I groan, spinning him and pinning his hips to the countertop. I push him forward, making his hands go flat against the mirror as I grind my dick on his ass. “I’ve got *tons* more to show you.”

His eyes roll back, his breath catching and that sexy fucking moan falling from his lips. I slide my hand around to his front.

“*Already hard again*,” I groan, stroking his erection. “*Fuck*, wreckage, I’m going to devour—”

“Why do you keep calling me that?”

He shifts, and I let him half turn, though I keep him pinned between me and the counter.

“What?”

His brow furrows. “Wreckage. Or you’ve said *little* wreckage before, too.” His frown deepens. “It feels like you’re low-key insulting me.”

“It’s not a diss,” I murmur, grabbing his waist and pinning him to the counter. *Fuck*, I love the feel of his fucking abs and the way his muscled, grooved hips coil under my touch.

“So what the fuck is it supposed to—”

“Because you wreck me.”

Roman goes still. He blinks, and I watch his throat bob. “W-what?”

“*You*,” I growl, jabbing a finger into his chest, “wreck *me*. Hence, little wreckage.”

“I’m six-foot-four,” he grumbles.

“Yeah, ‘little’ isn’t *literal*, asshole,” I grin. He gasps when I slide a hand between us to cup his thick erection. “I mean…*obviously*.”

Roman turns beet red.

Yeah, BLUSH for me, baby.

“It’s a term of endearment.”

His dark eyes hold my blues, his lip retreating between his teeth again.

“It sounds…”

“Adorable. Yes.”

He glowers. “I don’t *want* adorable. Or cute. Or...*terms of endearment.*”

“Because you’re a huge grump?”

He rolls his eyes. “Because I’m not a fucking chick looking for someone to call me pet names.”

I sigh dramatically. “There’s that hardline approach to masculinity that turns me on so—oh, come on!”

But Roman’s already pushing past me to the door.

“No one is calling you femme, psycho,” I grunt, grabbing his arm and yanking him around to face me. “It’s just a cute name.”

“I don’t *do* cute,” he grumbles.

“Too bad,” I grin. And before he can stop me, I’m crushing my mouth to his, and kissing him deeply.

And fuck me, the grumpy motherfucker *kisses me back*.

There’s hope for you yet, dickhead.

“Yeah, too bad,” I murmur again as I pull away, leaving him flushed and breathless. “Because you are. *Now*…” I groan deep in my chest and grind my erection against him. “I think there was talk of round two?”

Roman shivers, his cheeks heating again. “I…I need another drink first.”

My brows knit as he turns away from me and toward the door.

“I mean, you don’t *need* a drink.”

“Okay, then I *want* a drink,” he tosses over his shoulder.

Shit. The not-so-little fucker is armoring up again already, putting his “I’m so straight” walls back up. Which, frankly, is a bit ridiculous, considering that he just whimpered like a greedy little cock slut when I fucked his supposedly straight mouth.

“Wreckage—”

“My name is *Roman*,” he says tightly, turning to glare at me again.

I roll my eyes. “*Fine*. Roman. Fuck.”

“Can I leave now and get that drink?”

“Be my fucking guest, Grumpy.”

He shoots me another look. But if he thinks I *don’t* see the grin hiding in the corners of his mouth, or the way his eyes twinkle, or the way his face is still heated and flushed… He’s fucking dumb.

I let him leave first, then I follow, trailing behind and looking at my phone. Except, I’m texting *him*, six feet ahead of me.

ME

Your cum tastes fucking delicious, wreckage.

ROMAN

Stop it. I’m getting a drink and then going to my sister’s table.

ME

And you don’t want anyone there to see texts talking about the way you just deep throated my cock and then came all over my tongue?

ROMAN

Val. Fucking seriously.

ME

You make me seriously HARD, wreckage.

I smirk, watching him furiously try to simultaneously text and push his way through the crowd toward the bar. I quickly sneak up close behind him, and he almost drops his phone when I grab his ass.

“The *fuck*!” he snaps, whirling on me and grabbing a fistful of my shirt.

I just grin.

“Round two right here on the dancefloor?” I growl. He turns pink as I take a step closer to him. “You *kinky* motherfu—”

“*Roman*!!!”

I startle at the sound of Milena’s voice. Roman’s hand drops from my shirt, and we both turn.

Something’s seriously wrong.

At first, all I see is my friend rushing toward us. Then I spot Laz and Bane, supporting a totally unconscious Evelina between them.

“The FUCK!?!”

Roman’s voice booms through the club as he charges over to meet them, with me right behind.

“The fuck happened?!” he roars.

“I think she got roofied!” Milena shrieks, her face panicked as she rushes to my side and grabs my arm. “She just…she started to look sleepy and then blacked out—”

Suddenly Evie wakens, just enough to straighten up, then double over and puke all over Roman’s shoes. She groans, but then rolls her head up, looking at Roman with out-of-focus eyes and a sloppy grin on her face.

“*Roooooman*…” she giggles. “I think I messed up your cool shooooes.”

I exhale swiftly, stepping forward and squatting to peer into her face.

“She hasn’t been drugged,” I growl.

Her eyes meet mine, and she grins again.

“*Heeeeey*, Val…” she giggles. “C’mere. I got a *secret* to tell you…” She trails off, then immediately shuts her eyes and sags between Bane and Laz.

Roman is scowling as I stand and turn to look at him. “She’s *shitfaced*.”

Milena exhales heavily. “Thank *God*.” She turns and winces as she looks at Roman. “I’m so sorry, Rome. I don’t how she got like that! I’m always watching her—”

“It’s fine, Milena,” Roman growls. He steps forward, scooping his sister into his arms and cradling her against his chest. “I’ll take her home.”

“My car is right out front,” Bane offers.

“Great. Let’s go.”

I start to fall into step next to Roman, but he halts suddenly and turns.

“I got it,” he grunts, his eyes locked on mine, darkness swirling in them.

“I’ll come with—”

“Just stay here.”

I frown. “Dude, she’s my friend—”

“And she’s *my sister*,” he growls, his eyes hardening.

Then without another word, he turns and storms through the club, carrying Evie in his arms, his friends right behind him.

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15

ROMAN

"How is she?"

I look up from watching my sister's sleeping form as Laz swivels in the front seat to glance back at me.

"Fine," I shrug. "I mean, she'll feel like fucking shit tomorrow, but she's fine."

I exhale slowly, still shook from seeing my sister unconscious and Milena in hysterics about her being roofied.

Evie wasn't drugged. She's just a complete fucking lightweight who gets drunk off half a drink. God only knows how much booze she snuck to get like this.

I say *snuck* because her friends, especially Milena, always make a point of keeping an eye on her when they're out for that very reason. I'm thankful for it, considering that I worry like *hell* sometimes about Evie's naïveté paired with her complete inability to drink.

I turn to look at her, my brow furrowing.

Goddammit, Evie.

I love my sister to death, but c'mon. She *knows* she can barely handle half a beer.

I scowl, twisting my head to stare at the neon of the city flickering past the tinted windows of Bane's black Rolls-Royce Spectre.

I listen to the rhythmic sound of Evie sleeping next to me. Slowly, my worry for her lessens, and I start to worry about someone else.

…About *me*.

What the fuck is happening to me?

My "temporary moments of weakness" are becoming my reality.

A dark, addictive need, like a drug.

And the more I keep telling myself that it's just being drunk and horny, or a purely biological reaction to an external stimulus, or whatever other excuse I'm floating in any given moment when it comes to Val, the more they start to sound exactly like what they are:

Bullshit.

Tonight, there's not even any lie to fall back on. I wasn't drunk, not really.

Tonight, I fucking *wanted him*.

I was jealous, too—jealous of the attention that fucking guy on his lap was getting. After being ignored for days, seeing that just made me…

Angry.

Hurt. Pissed off. Possessive.

Fucking *jealous* of a man I didn't even know, just because he was sitting in the lap of a man I've tried every which way to tell myself I don't give a shit about.

That I'm not attracted to him.

That he's just a blip. A glitch in my matrix.

Pretty sure now the glitch is *me*.

Because the more I try to tell myself that I'm not attracted to men, the more I keep thinking about one *certain* man.

…And how futile it is to pretend I’m not attracted to him.

Because I am. *A lot*.

I mean, he’s fucking beautiful. Those goddamn eyes. The longish, shaggy dark hair that gives him a rock-star vibe. The fashion-model jawline and cheekbones. His grooved, tattooed body, hewn from rock thanks to a lifetime of dance.

I swallow uncomfortably as flashbacks from tonight hit like small fireworks going off in front of my face.

The bathroom. Letting him—I *did* let him—pull me into that stall. His mouth on mine. His hands on my body, his touch igniting fire within me and turning me on in ways I *never* have been before.

His lips against my skin. His filthy words in my ear.

…My lips around his cock.

I blink rapidly as it all comes rushing back at once.

Fucking hell, *I sucked a cock tonight*.

Without hesitation. I fucking *wanted* it. And while I was doing it, feeling his thick erection gliding past my stretched lips and over my tongue, spilling precum down my throat, I wanted *more*.

Feeling him seize control and take away my power gave me, ironically, a power and a control I’ve never felt before.

“Jesus, the two of you.”

Laz’s voice rips me from my memories of everything that just happened. I freeze when I realize I’m *rock* fucking hard, too.

Bane turns to glance at our friend. “What?”

“You’re both sulking and moping. I’d like to know why.”

Bane’s brow furrows. “Are you high?” He jerks a thumb over his shoulder to where my sister is sleeping off her bender.

Laz rolls his eyes. “Okay, Evie drank too much. But she’ll be fine after a good night’s sleep, some Advil, and a big greasy breakfast. You two look like you just left a funeral.”

I shake my head. “I do not.”

“You *do*.” Laz grins. “I mean…” He prods Bane in the arm, who promptly shakes him off. “I know *this one* is all hung up about some girl.”

Bane’s chiseled jaw tightens, his tattooed knuckles tensing as he grips the steering wheel tightly. His middle finger curls and uncurls, stroking the side of the finger next to it.

Bane’s good about hiding his emotions, always has been. I mean, shit, we’ve known each other since we were kids, and even though I'm aware there’s this big *thing* that happened to him when he was young, *I* don’t even know what it was.

He’s…not exactly the open, sharing type.

All I know is, there’s darkness in my friend that he keeps locked down tight, almost without a single “tell”.

But the finger-rub?

That’s it. That’s the tell.

“I never said that,” Bane grunts in reply to Laz’s prodding.

“Doesn’t mean I’m not right, though.”

Bane's jaw clenches tighter. One finger strokes the other.

“Drop it, Laz,” I growl.

Laz sighs, dramatically letting his head fall back against the seat. “*Fine*. Be an emo dickhead,” he says, turning to grin at Bane.

…Who doesn’t take the bait.

“What about you, then?” Laz, ever-hungry for drama or excitement, swivels to look at me in the back seat next to my sleeping sister.

“Huh?”

“You’re a mopey little bitch right now as well. Girl shit too?”

I shrug, turning to look out the window.

The high that I felt earlier with Val is fading. Now, there’s just anxiety.

About what happened.

And when it’ll happen again…

“Roman.”

I flinch and drag my eyes back up to Laz. “What?”

He shakes his head. “Great. Both of you idiots put pussy on a pedestal and now look at you. Emo fucks.”

Bane catches my glance in the rearview mirror and silently rolls his eyes.

“See,” Laz goes on, continuing to pontificate. “*This* is why I stay single.”

“Oh, is that the reason?” Bane says with a snarky smile. “Here I thought it was that your personality repels women.”

“Hey, fuck you too, dickhead,” Laz snickers, flipping Bane off. “No, gentlemen, I have it down to a science. One night only, no repeats, finito. No muss, no fuss.”

“Ah, yes,” Bane smirks, rolling his eyes again. “Meaningless, temporary physical release while using a person as a sex toy. What *everyone* wants,” he says dryly.

“News flash,” Laz throws back. “That is *literally* what every man in their prime like us wants. I mean, sometimes you’re just looking for a willing hole—right, Rome?”

I’m back to staring out the window at the city flickering past us. Is that what it was back there with Val? Meaningless release? Was I just…

My face heats.

A willing hole?

Darkness slithers and coils through me, quickening my pulse and making my cock twitch.

Why are you so turned on by that thought?

Because I am. In some supremely fucked-up way, the idea of being Val's willing mouth, his toy, his submissive plaything is…*hot*.

Really, *really* hot, in the same way that him putting me on my knees and taking control of me as he fucked my mouth with my head against the wall was.

It's same aching, needy sensation I get when he pins my arms down or binds them with my own belt.

I don't know what the fuck that's about, or why having the control that I cling to so fiercely suddenly plucked from me is such a fucking rush.

"Roman."

"*What*?" I snap, turning back to Laz, who immediately rolls his eyes.

"Christ, the two of you." He shakes his head, turning to look ahead at the road. "I'm telling you, you both need to get on my level."

"Your level of meaningless, empty sex with strangers," Bane says dryly.

"See? You're learning already," Laz grins.

"And yet, here you are…"

Laz scowls, jerking a thumb at Evie. "Because I'm a chivalrous fucker, *dick*."

"Sure," Bane snickers.

Laz shrugs and leans back in his seat, his fingers laced behind his head. "For the record, I've got some irons in the fire."

Bane chuckles. "You have a *vivid* imagination—"

"No, since you're so interested," Laz mutters, "I've been eying that punk chick who dances with Evelina. The blonde with the pink streaks? Dove

Marchetti?”

Without warning, the car screeches violently to a stop at a red light. I brace Evelina and myself in time, but Laz goes flying forward, barely catching himself before he slams his face into the dashboard.

“*Dude*!” he roars, whirling on Bane. “The fuck, man?! Watch the fucking face!”

I'm about to tell Bane to pay the fuck attention. But then I see the dark, livid look on his face and the viciousness snarling behind his eyes, and I reconsider.

“Yo, Antonov,” I growl quietly, trying to catch his attention in the rearview mirror. “You good?”

“Light changed faster than I thought,” he growls, looking dead ahead.

“Well, watch the fucking road. Jesus,” Laz sighs, rolling his neck. “Anyway, Dove. *Great* ass. And that mouth?” He groans. “Fucking *made* for sucking—”

The car lurches forward, slamming Laz back into his seat.

“Motherfucker! The *road*!”

* * *

BANE AND LAZ are still bickering about God-knows-what as they drive away after dropping a now-sleeping Evie and me off at our father’s house. The guards out front are visibly concerned about my sister’s condition, but I tell them she’s just tired as I lift her into my arms and carry her inside.

“What the hell happened?” Stepan frowns, standing quickly from his seat on the couch. He closes his laptop and rushes over to where I’m paused mid-step on my way past the library—Stepan’s “office space” of choice here at the house.

“She’s fine,” I grunt. “Just tired.”

Stepan’s brow furrows. “I can smell the alcohol and vomit from here. What the fuck happened?”

“Step, it’s seriously nothing. She just drank too much.” My eyes shift. “My father—”

“—doesn’t need to know, got it,” Stepan says with a small smile.

“Thanks,” I mutter.

“He’s not here, anyway. He’s with Mr. Antonov at the safe house.”

I nod my chin at the stairs. “I’m going to put her to bed.”

Stepan smiles. “You’re a good brother, Roman.”

Upstairs, I get a semi-conscious Evie to at least gargle some mouthwash. I’m *not* changing my own sister into a nightgown or pj's, though, so I start to tuck her into bed in her club dress before she groggily opens her eyes.

“*Rome…?*”

“I’m here,” I smile down at her. “You’re home safe. Just close your eyes.”

“I…” she frowns, her eyes falling shut. “I puked on you.”

“It’s okay. You drank too much.”

“*You* drink too much…” she mumbles, her head lolling to the side on her pillow before her brow knits. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

You’re right.

She cracks her eyes open and lifts the blanket to look down at herself. “I should change…”

“Hang on.”

I grab a t-shirt and sweats from her dresser and hand them to her before walking to the door and ducking outside.

“Rome?”

Evie's back in bed when I step back into the room, her t-shirt on backward and inside out. Close enough. I walk over and pull the blankets back up over her, then go to leave.

"Wait…"

My sister's hand finds mine, making me turn to look at her.

"Yeah?"

Evie shifts in bed, her eyes opening a bit. "Are you happy, Rome?"

I shrug. "Sure?"

"No, like…*really* happy."

Her eyes drift shut again, and I smile as I push her hair back from her face.

"I think so, Eves," I say quietly.

Who knows if I'm even capable of that.

"I hope you are," she mumbles. "Happy, I mean." She sighs heavily, groaning. "I threw up…"

"It happens," I smile, tucking the blankets tighter around her. "It's okay—"

"Everyone thinks I'm so good," she murmurs as her head sinks into the pillow.

"Eves, trust me," I sigh, "no one's going to think any less of you just because you had a bit too much—"

"*What if they're wrong?*"

The words barely escape her lips as sleep starts to drag her under.

"*I have secrets, Rome,*" she mumbles. "*What if I'm not good…?*"

Her words devolve to light, rhythmic breathing as she drifts off.

I smile wryly and squeeze her shoulder through the duvet.

"Night, Evie."

Downstairs, I find the library empty, which usually means Stepan has remembered that he has his own place and doesn't need to spend twenty-four hours a day here glued to his phone or laptop.

I pour myself some vodka and take a heavy sip.

What if I'm not good.

Evie, obviously, is just drunk. I already know her "secret" is that she went on that fucking Club Venom app. I still have no idea how to bring that up with her. Honestly, at this point, I probably won't.

Nothing came of it. Stepan is savvy enough with this house's tech to be able to show me internet traffic for the last few weeks. No one has been on the Club Venom app since the night I saw that conversation on Evie's phone. So…that's done.

What if I'm not good.

Evie doesn't have a fucking thing to worry about there. She *is* good; alarmingly, slightly worryingly so.

But me?

I squeeze my eyes shut as I take another sip, letting the vodka burn my throat.

"Good" isn't lying to yourself and the people who love you. "Good" isn't sneaking around, drowning your own self-hatred with alcohol, and playing risky sex games *with a fucking man*.

"Good" isn't looking yourself in the mirror and hating every fucking facet of what you see as you try and convince yourself that you don't find Val Bancroft extremely attractive. Which means—

"Roman!!"

I startle, choking on the vodka in my mouth as a haggard-looking Stepan rushes into the room, phone in one hand, drawn gun in the other.

"It's your father," he says tightly.

My pulse stills.

“He’s going to be okay. Nikolai Antonov, too. But there was an explosion at the safe house. A firebomb. Come—I’ll drive you to the hospital.”

I bolt after him, taking the gun he hands me and checking the mag before I stick it into the back of my pants. When we rush into the main hall and I see the small fucking *army* of heavily armed Nikitin men there, I grab his shoulder.

“The fuck is all this?”

Stepan’s face is gray as he turns back to me. “For your sister’s safety.” His jaw tenses. “We’re fairly sure the attack was the work of the Obsidian Syndicate.”

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16

VAL

"SHE'S SO *MEAN*!"

I snort as I follow Naomi into the women's locker room, with Milena right behind me.

It's pretty late, but Madame Kuzmina, our artistic director, considers anything less than literal perfection to be a personal affront. Tonight, that Stalinist drive meant she kept Naomi, Milena, and I late to hammer down the *pas de trois* from *La Bayadère*, a Russian ballet involving a love triangle between Solor the warrior—that would be me—the princess Gamzatti, Naomi, and the temple dancer Nikiya, Milena.

And trust me, I feel hammered the fuck down.

"I want to just say it's her Russian nature," Milena groans, glancing at Naomi, who's slumped on the bench by the lockers. "But she takes it to another level."

"It doesn't help that you fucking antagonize her, Val," Naomi grumbles, shooting me a dark look.

"*Moi*?" I give them my most charming smile, framing my face with my hands and fluttering my eyelashes dramatically.

"*Yes*," they mutter in unison, glaring at me.

Milena turns away, peeling off her tights and leotard and wrapping a towel around her.

Again, these girls are like sisters. Or utterly—and I do mean *utterly*—platonic pals. For a while there, the other guys in the Zakharova had a habit of leaving directly after rehearsal and showering at home or at their gyms or wherever, and honestly, it got lonely and boring being the only one in the guys' changing room.

So I just started using this one instead. It's one hundred percent not a sexual thing, and I've bent over backward to make sure I'm not making anyone uncomfortable. If Dove's around, for instance, I use the guys' room, because I can tell she's not down with sharing the space with me.

"Maybe I'm just trying to charm my way through her icy exterior. She should thank me: it might actually get her a date before she hits the retirement home."

I'm kidding. Magda Kuzmina has this way of *appearing* much older than she is. Part of it is her take-no-prisoners approach to her work. It's also her fondness for flowing black dresses and shawls, with the silver rings covering her fingers giving her the appearance of a Roma fortune teller.

The general thinking is that she's in her late forties. But I've had her right in my face scolding me enough times that I know better. If she's even thirty-five, I'd be surprised.

I let Milena and Naomi hit the showers first. While they're in there, I plop down on the bench and open my texts.

ME

we missed you today!

EVELINA

Thanks! It felt so weird not being there!

ME

Everything all good, though?

EVELINA

Yeah. I mean, I think? No one tells me freaking anything!

"Freaking anything". She's not trying to be funny. She just literally talks like that. The girl can't even swear in a text when she's annoyed. This is why I love her.

ME

what happened?

Evelina texted us all this morning as we were showing up in the alley out back to let us know she wouldn't be at the theater today. At first, we were all joking about her hangover, but then she sent another text mentioning that her absence was due to "dumb mafia crap". Translation: she was being kept home.

Naturally, I asked Milena if she knew what was going on, given that her father, Marko Kalishnik, helms the Kalishnik Bratva. But she had no idea.

I even texted Roman—against my better judgment, given the way he got all pissy and "bUt i'M sTrAiGHt" after what happened at Doomsday last night—but he never messaged me back, just left me on read.

Asshole.

EVELINA

I have no idea! Papa and Roman came home at like four in the morning, and all the yelling woke me up.

EVELINA

Papa's clothes looked burned or singed, but he wouldn't tell me anything! WTF!!

"WTF" is as close to vulgarity as you're going to get from that girl. She probably thinks the F is for fudge, anyway.

EVELINA

Now I'm a prisoner in my own home. Papa's men are armed and walking around everywhere, and there are THREE of them who are supposed to follow me if even step out of my room. So I'm not, lol.

Then she sends a gif of a cartoon dog sitting at a table, the one where it and the room is on fire and he's saying "this is fine".

ME

Shit, I'm sorry. You want us to come rescue you?

EVELINA

lol I'd say yes, but someone would probably shoot you all.

I frown. Evelina missing rehearsal *never* happens. And the thing about her dad and Roman coming home at four in the morning, with her dad's clothes "burned and singed"? And now armed men patrolling the Nikitin mansion?

I switch to another text conversation.

ME

Just checking again to make sure everything's ok. Evie says that shit is a little wild at your house rn.

No reply.

ME

Dude, you could at least answer…

My texts switch from "delivered" to "read".

Then nothing.

Motherfucker…

ME

I can see you leaving me on read, you know

ME

RUDE…

ME

Or are you still trying to recover after the best head of your life last night?

ME

I get it. I've had complaints about being "too good" before. It happens.

He reads those, too. Still nothing.

ME

if I didn't mention it last night, you have a GREAT dick. Solid A+. Huge fan of your balls, too.

ME

Answer my goddamn texts in the next century and I might even suck them into my mouth again.

ME

Don’t pretend you didn’t love it when I did that. Guess none of the girls you’ve been with knew what they were doing, amirite?

I glare at the “read” notification and the complete lack of response.

ME

Dude, I can SEE that you’re reading these. So either you’re being an ass, or else you’re so turned on by these texts and remembering last night that you’re too busy jerking that gorgeous dick to respond. In which case, A) rude, but B) send pics :P

He reads that one too. And of course, there’s no response. Okay, this is getting old *real* fast.

ME

I actually refuse to believe you’ve never sucked a guy off before.

ME

WAY too fucking good at it. You blew my fucking mind, wreckage.

I almost don’t send the next one. But fuck it, why not.

ME

you’re such a good little cocksucker, and you look so fucking hot on your knees.

Message: read.

Message: unreplied to.

God. Dammit.

An idea pops into my head. I half peel down my tights, positioning my phone to take a tasteful, artistic shot of my semi to shock Roman into responding.

“Oh, *hell* fucking no.”

I wince when I hear the voice behind me, pull up my tights and lock my phone before I turn to grin innocently at Naomi. “What?”

“*What?*” She glares at me, towel tied around her, her hands on her hips. “Don’t fucking *what* me. If you want to send dick pics to one of your little fuck buddies, do it somewhere else.”

“Eww!” Milena laughs as she steps past Naomi, also wrapped in a towel. “Dude, you do that in here and you are *permanently banished*. For real. Also…” She shakes her head. “No one wants a dick pic.”

“I *beg* to differ,” I grin.

She rolls her eyes, trying not to laugh as she turns around to open her locker.

“Besides, it wasn’t a *dick pic*,” I say indignantly. “It was a tasteful, artistic nude.”

“*Jesus*,” Naomi sighs, laughing as she turns away from me and starts pulling on sweats and a hoodie.

“*Please*,” I smirk. “A hundred bucks says if I went through your phone, I’d find *plenty* of up close and personal shots of Nico’s pierced little buddy.”

Naomi whirls toward me, her mouth falling open.

Milena giggles as she buttons up her shirt. “Girl, you *did* let the piercing thing slip when we were drunk, remember?”

Naomi groans, burying her face in her hands briefly before shooting me a look. “Well, you’re not getting your hands on my phone.” Her lips curl into a slightly hidden grin. “And FYI, there’s nothing *little* about the situation.”

Milena and I both burst out laughing as our friend blushes.

“That’s my girl,” I grin, shaking my head and turning away to wrap a towel around my waist. I strip off my tights and head toward the showers, grinning to myself. I didn’t really have this before I joined the Zakharova: the friends, the camaraderie.

And the thing is, *I need it*. I need these girls, this sense of belonging, almost like a family. It’s not necessarily a mask, more like a security blanket. But there’s no question: this closeness is something I need to survive.

To drown out the echoes of my childhood.

The abuse.

The fights.

The amnesia.

The irony of my memory loss is that the real horrors in my life came *after* that. The shitty early childhood and the absent parents? Yeah, I've forgotten all that and them. But there's no escaping the hell that came later, at night in foster care.

Amnesia hit too early for that.

I absently let my hand drift over the chaotic ink on my left arm before I flinch and pull away. I dry off in the now-empty locker room and get dressed. Then I glance at my phone. Completely unsurprisingly, there's not a single fucking reply from Roman.

I contemplate sending that dick pic, but then decide Roman doesn't deserve to be rewarded for his radio silence leave-me-on-read bullshit, so I don't.

I'm the last one here as I walk through the empty theater to the back door. It's dark when I step outside and turn to make sure the door locks behind me.

That's when I get hit from behind and my face gets slammed into the door.

I grunt, wincing, but this isn't my first time getting jumped, and it's *far* from my first fight.

Picked the wrong guy, motherfucker.

I grin savagely and drive my elbow back, hitting soft flesh and eliciting a snarl of pain. I do it again and then whirl, tackling the fucker and knocking him on his ass.

What the fuck.

I stare in shock as Roman picks himself up off the ground, his face furious as he squares off with me, his eyes narrowed dangerously.

“Dude, what the fuck are—”

I grunt again when he slams into my midsection, doubling me over and tackling me to the ground.

Oh, it’s fucking *on* now, bitch.

Roman yells when I slam my forearm into his face, and *barely* miss his balls—shame as it would be to damage those—with my knee. I roll us over, punching him again before we scramble away from each other and face off again.

“*You*,” he snarls, glaring death as he curls his big, tattooed hands to fists. “You’re fucking *dead*.”

I have no idea what the fuck is going on. But it feels like a *bit* much as a response to me calling him a “good little cocksucker”.

I mean, it was a goddamn *compliment*.

I’ve checked out the underground fights he likes to attend a couple of times and watched Roman in action. He’s a good boxer. But that's the point: he’s a *boxer*, not a down-and-dirty *street fighter*.

There’s a difference.

In a ring match with a referee, Roman’s a fucking terror. He’s big, fearless, knows how to move and handle his body, and hits like a goddamn freight train.

Me, I'm an “okay” boxer, but I’m a fucking *beast* of a fighter. In street fights, there’s no ring, no ref, and *no one* plays by any rules. The only unfair fight is the one you fucking lose. That was beaten into me in my foster years when the other kids would come to kick my ass—for being the new kid, dancing, or being queer.

So, if we were in a ring right now, I’d be screwed. But surprise alley fight?

It’s fuckin’ *on*, baby.

Roman charges me. I dodge left, evading his monster of a punch before I slam my elbow down on the back of his shoulder as he passes. He grunts,

then chokes out an even louder cry of pain when I ram my knee up into his kidney area. I slam my elbow into the middle of his back, making him snarl again before I shove past him and dance away.

He whirls, pure rage on his face. He glances down at his side and winces, then looks up at me incredulously. I swear—I fucking *swear*—he's about to complain that I'm not playing by the rules.

But instead, he charges me again.

This time, I do catch a glancing blow to the jaw. It makes me see stars and also pisses me the fuck off. So I have zero problem jamming my fist into his face, kicking him hard in the shin, and then spinning us both, pinning his arm behind his back and slamming him into the brick wall beside us.

"Fucking *enough*!" I roar, gritting my teeth and keeping him immobile as Roman twists in my grip.

"*You fucking*—!"

"ROMAN!!!" I yell, wrenching his arm even harder in his shoulder socket and making him wince. "Fucking *stop*!" I hiss as he tries to jam his foot onto mine. "The fuck is your goddamn problem!!"

"*You*!" he roars back.

He actually does get my foot this time, just enough for me to momentarily lose my focus and my grip. But before he can get a punch in, I grab his wrists and slam him back against the wall.

"*STOP*!" I yell in his face. "The fuck is this about!?"

"My father, you fuck!" he spits. "He could have died!"

I blink, staring at him. "Your…" My brow furrows. "Fuck, Roman, what happened to your—"

"Your brother's people fucking tried to blow up him and Nikolai Antonov!"

My mind goes numb for a second. Then I frown and shake my head. "*What*? No, he didn't—"

“Like *fuck* he didn’t!” Roman hurls back, straining in my grip. “My dad and Bane’s were at a safe house. *No one* knows its location. And yet, *your brother’s* fucking people were able to find them and…”

Shit. Suddenly, I think I know why Evie’s been locked in her room all day.

“*Jesus*, Roman,” I growl. “I’m so sorry. How’s your—”

I barely miss his fist, grunting before I grab his arms again and slam them back to the wall, my weight against his.

“STOP IT!” I roar.

“No fucking way!” he hurls back. “No one knew about that safe house,” he hisses. “*No one*. But I had the address in my phone.”

I stare at him. “And you’re blaming me because…?”

“Because you had my phone last night,” he hisses. “When you…when…”

When I took his phone and snapped some spicy pics of me slurping his dick.

I blink, utterly bemused as I stare at him. “When I was—”

“When you took those fucking perverted pictures,” he mumbles.

“*Hold on*,” I growl, still pressing my body to his. “You think I’m James fucking Bond? That I…what, seduced you—which, spoiler alert, doesn’t take much—”

He surges against me, trying to escape my grip. But my frame pins him to the wall even tighter.

Our pulses jump together.

“*You*—”

“You *seriously* think that somehow, in the middle of taking hot pics, and, you know, *sucking your dick*,” I snap, “I magically knew you had an address to a safe house I don’t even know about on your phone, and *found it* somehow?”

“He could have died!” Roman snarls, twisting in my grip.

“And I’m sorry!” I roar back. “But I didn’t have shit to do with any of it!!”

Roman grunts, half shoving me back before I slam against him, keeping him against the wall, my chest to his.

“Is that who made you this way?” I growl.

Roman scowls at me. “*What?*”

“I’m guessing it’s your dad’s old school Russian homophobia that has you so fucking twisted up and hating who you are?” I snap.

I press closer against him, and…*oh shit*…

Pretty sure he’s fucking *hard*.

Roman’s face darkens. “I am *not*—”

“You swallowed my dick like a good boy last night,” I hiss, getting right in his face. “Begging for more, moaning around my cock while my cum filled your mouth. And don’t try to pretend you weren’t leaking precum into your pants while you did it, too.”

“Get the fuck away from—”

He chokes, his eyes bulging when I let go of one of his wrists and jam my hand between us. I was right.

He’s *rock hard*, his cock straining against his pants. And when I slide my hand over it, the fucking thing pulses and jumps, and gets even fucking harder.

Roman stares at me, his mouth hanging open as I start to rapidly jerk his dick through his pants.

“What’s got you so hard, wreckage…” I growl, dropping my lips to his neck. Roman stills, his breath catching in his throat. His free hand goes to my chest, but he doesn’t shove me back.

He just fucking grips my shirt in his fist.

“I—I’m—”

“Was it the fight? The violence?” I rasp into his ear. “Is that what made you so achy for me? Because, fuck, baby, I know the feeling.”

I start to jerk him even harder, loving the way the fight goes completely out of him and he shakes against me as I pin him to the wall.

“Or is this the real reason you wanted to surprise me in a dark alley…” I murmur, my breath teasing over his neck as I pump his swollen erection. “Because you were just dying to get this big dick played with…”

My hand keeps moving, pumping him fast. His eyes roll back, his jaw going slack as his body starts to shake against me.

I could make him come in his pants right fucking now, and it’d be hot as fuck.

But I’m not going to.

Not after he fucking jumped me.

What I will do, however, is make a *point*.

“You wanna fucking come for me?” I snarl into his ear as I squeeze his dick and jerk it faster. “You wanna make a cummy mess in your pants for me?”

Roman whimpers desperately.

I give his throbbing hard cock one more squeeze and pump my arm for three more fast strokes. And then, just as his cock is swelling even harder, and twitching in my hand?

…I let go.

Of his dick. Of him. I step away, smiling smugly.

“I don’t give a fuck what label you give yourself, asshole,” I hiss. “Gay, bi, straight, whatever.”

Roman swallows heavily as I step back into his personal space, his face flushed.

“But labels aside,” I growl as I lower my mouth to his ear again, “you get *real hard* for dick, motherfucker.”

Roman’s throat bobs, and he stares at me with wild eyes as I step away.

“*Fuck you*,” he chokes.

“Not a *goddamn* chance,” I snarl. “And believe me, that’s not going to change until you can look yourself in the eye and admit who you are.”

We stand there in dark, glowering at each other as the city hums around us.

Roman’s eyes turn icy. “Stay the fuck away from me.”

“*Gladly*, motherfucker,” I growl before I turn and storm up the alley.

Fucking gladly, indeed.

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17

ROMAN

I STARE GLUMLY at my phone, scowling.

Fuck.

Even though I've double checked that I've got all my notifications set to "on", and even though I haven't *had* any notifications in the last two minutes, I still thumb open my texts and tap on his name.

Me: I shouldn't have come at you like that last night. I was angry.

Me: I'm sorry.

Me: Yes, there was reason to think your brother had something to do with the explosion. But I was wrong to immediately accuse you of anything.

Me: Val, I'm sorry.

Me: Heyyy, me agin. Im fuckn sorry.

Me: sorrrry. Plz anser

I cringe as I re-read the texts from four nights ago, which became progressively sloppier the drunker I got.

I exhale, dropping the phone onto the bed in my room at my father's house and then collapsing back across it.

Shit. If I was him, I wouldn't be texting me back either. Or answering the late-night, drunken calls. Or responding to the fucking *cringe-worthy* blurry

photo I sent him later the same night of the text barrage—me, shirtless, in the hot tub out back, making…*some* kind of face at the camera.

Jesus Christ. Was that me trying to be sexy or something?

Again: *cringe*. And the total lack of response reinforces that.

I embarrassed myself coming at him like that and accusing him of… whatever. And then I went and embarrassed myself ten times worse with all that followed.

Great fucking job, buddy.

Usually, I'd shake this off. I've embarrassed myself in front of girls dozens of times. Puking in front of a girl you're hoping to take home isn't exactly a proud moment. Neither is being unable to, uh, *rise to the occasion* once you get her there, because you're too fucked up.

When that's happened, I've shrugged it off, had another drink, and moved on.

But that's not working with Val. I can't just "shrug this off". I can't "move on". I don't even want to drink it away, since I was pretty loaded when I attacked him the other night, and drinking reminds me of that.

I mean, I'm still drinking. But I don't really want to.

Bottom line: I can't shake this one off. I can't shake *him* off.

I groan, rolling over on the bed and picking my phone up again.

Still no response. But I tap on his name and start typing again anyway.

Like an idiot.

Me: I'm sorry. You've gotten under my skin, and the attraction I feel for you fucks with my head. I'm new to all of this and have no idea what being a man who wants another man is supposed to feel like. I don't know how to balance how I was raised with how you make me feel. Please forgive me and help me.

I mean, I don't fucking *send it.*

Obviously.

But it feels good to type it out, even if I immediately delete it again.

“Rome?”

Evelina’s voice calls through my door as she knocks on it.

“It’s open.”

My sister comes in, looking gorgeous in the light pink she’s wearing.

“Your tie is crooked,” she frowns, walking over to me. She fusses with it for a bit, her brow furrowed, before she finally grins. “There. All handsome now.”

I smile wryly. Evie sighs.

“Well…” She gives me a weak smile. “They’re uh…here.”

“Time to escape out the window, then?”

She giggles as she grabs my arm and pulls me to my feet. “More like time to be charming for your future wife.”

* * *

“IT’S DISGUSTING.”

Bogdan Lukashov scowls, stuffing a huge piece of steak into his mouth and chewing viciously. He washes it down with a big gulp of vodka, then shakes his head and waves his fork across the table at my father.

“Disgusting, and a declaration of war. You’re sure it was Vaughn Bancroft?”

My father nods, his face dark. “*I* am. But there’s no concrete evidence.” He shakes his head grimly. “And even if there was…”

“Going after him directly could sour things with Cosimo, yes,” Bogdan grunts. “I understand your predicament, my friend.”

You gotta love the naked honesty of Bratva politics. *Nobody* is pretending that this marriage is about anything other than consolidating power and establishing a connection to Cosimo Sangrini, not even the father of the bride.

Speaking of…

I pull my attention away from my father to Dasha, sitting across the table from me. She looks stunning: a gorgeous yellow dress that fits her perfectly, contrasts well with her dark hair and blue eyes, and strikes a perfect balance between sexy and elegant.

Arrangements aside, you'd think it would give me *some* kind of spark, knowing that this gorgeous woman is going to be my wife.

But it doesn’t.

At all.

“You could have died, Pavel!” Bogdan grunts around another huge bite of New York strip.

He almost did, too. Except luckily, my father and Nikolai Antonov, who were meeting at my father’s safe house to discuss the questionable gaming commissioner my father was looking to pressure for a casino license, had just stepped outside to smoke cigars when the firebomb went off. They both got singed pretty good from burning falling debris, but neither was hurt.

Dasha breaks the uncomfortable silence that follows. “So, Evelina…”

“Please, Evie is fine,” my sister says brightly, smiling across the table at my future bride.

“Your name is Evelina,” Papa growls, shooting my sister a stern look as he drinks from his glass.

Dasha just smiles. “Well, *Evelina*, how’s the Zakharova? I *adore* ballet.”

“Ahh, yes,” Bogdan beams. “Dasha was quite the ballerina herself when she was younger!”

Dasha rolls her eyes and waves him off, turning back to Evie.

“Nothing close to you, obviously,” she laughs. “But I did love to dance.”

“You could always get back into it,” Evelina shrugs. “There are a *ton* of places in New York that teach people like you…former dancers who loved it but haven’t done it for a while. You’d have a blast.”

Dasha smiles brightly. “Yeah? That sounds super fun! I also *have* to see a performance at the Mercury while we’re in town.”

It would be *so* much easier to be pissed about this fucking marriage if the woman I’m supposed to be marrying wasn’t so damn *nice*. And cool.

I glance at my sister, gritting my teeth when I see the way she beams at Dasha with stars in her eyes.

Evelina has *always* wanted a sister. When we were little, she’d say it to me as payback after I was an asshole or stole one of her stuffies or something: *“I wish I had a sister instead.”*

When she got a little older, but still a kid, she’d see Papa with one of his dozen or so girlfriends and get all giddy, wondering if Papa was getting married again and her dreams of a sister might finally come to fruition.

Well, she might actually get her wish now. Sister, sister-in-law…I don’t think it makes much difference to Evie. She beams at the glamorous, pretty, cool older girl who’ll *be* a sister to her sooner rather than later.

“So…” Dasha grins at Evie. “Any boyfriends?”

My sister turns fuchsia. “*Oh*…no,” she stammers. “No, I—”

“No boys for my little princess,” Pavel grunts. “The only boys I let near her are the fairies she dances with.” He laughs loudly, and Bogdan joins in.

Evie frowns deeply, turning to glance at me. I shake my head subtly as if to say, “not the time”. But inside, I’m seething in a way that shocks me.

“That one always hanging around you…” Papa snorts. “The little fruity one.”

“*Papa*!” Evelina says quietly. “You can’t say that.”

He chuckles. “Pfft, I just did. The little prancing one. Valerie. Valencia.”

“Val.”

The fury in my chest twists fiercely as his name rolls off my tongue. “His name is *Val*,” I bark coldly.

My father gives me a look and then shrugs, shoving more food into his mouth. “Whatever. You know who I mean. The gay one.”

“He’s bi.”

Papa looks up sharply, his gaze boring into me.

Fuck.

Why the *hell* did I just say that? What the fuck possessed me to—

“Excuse me?” he rumbles.

I clear my throat. “He’s bi, Papa.”

He scowls. “The fuck does that mean?”

“It… It means he likes men *and* women,” Evie murmurs.

Our father snorts, grinning widely as he knocks back more vodka.

“*Both*!” He roars with laughter, turning to grin at Bogdan. “Horny little fucker wants to have his cake and eat it too, eh!”

He and Bogdan crack up, while Evie, Dasha, and I say nothing, exchanging uncomfortable looks across the table.

“Can you imagine having a son like that?” Papa sighs, looking at Dasha’s father. “The shame it would bring you?”

My hand closes to a fist on my lap. I feel a soft tap on my forearm, and when I turn, I see Evie looking at me curiously. I immediately open my fist and roll my shoulder.

“Pinched neck,” I mumble.

A phone suddenly pings. Evie blushes, scrambling to snatch it off the chair next to her as it chimes again.

“Sorry!” she blurts.

“Not at the table, princess, you know that,” Papa grunts.

Evie’s eyes go wide.

“*Oh my God!*” she chokes, her hand flying to her mouth. She leaps to her feat, her face pale and horrified. “Papa! I’m sorry, but I have to go!!”

“Like hell you do,” Papa growls. “Sit down and—”

“A friend’s been in an accident!”

Dasha gasps, her hand also flying to her mouth as my pulse jumps.

“*Who*?” I croak. “Who was—”

“Val.”

It feels like the ground literally falls away beneath me. Like the floor just… *collapses* under my feet, sending me tumbling down into an abyss.

No.

“*What?*” I choke out, lurching awkwardly to my feet. “What…what hap—”

“Motorcycle!” she blurts. “Someone hit him! He’s at Mt. Sinai!” She turns to our father again, her face anguished. “*Please*, Papa!”

He rolls his eyes, then exhales, waving a hand. “Okay, okay. *Fine*.”

My hand lands on her arm. “I’ll drive you.”

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18

VAL

FUCK ME, my *everything* hurts.

Head, back, shoulder, hand. Even my fucking *balls* hurt, which is the shit icing on the turd cake that tonight turned into.

Mercifully, there's no damage to my legs or feet. Some road rash, a dislocated shoulder, some fractured ribs, and a *motherfucker* of a bruise on my right thigh.

And a concussion. That's what scares the fuck out of me. When you've already lost significant chunks of your memory…well…

But I'll live. More importantly, I'll still *dance*, in three to four weeks, according to the doctors. After my ribs heal up a little and the bruising and scrapes go down, I should be back to showroom condition.

Thank *fuck*.

Now, about tonight.

Was I riding recklessly, not paying enough attention to the road and other drivers?

Yes.

Was that because of a certain fucking man being permanently in my brain and refusing to eject himself?

Maybe. Probably.

Definitely.

What a fucking asshole.

Milena, Naomi, Dove, Miguel, James, Brooklyn, even Kir—Brooklyn's psycho-hot way older boyfriend who runs the Nikolayev Bratva and also happens to own the Zakharova and the Mercury Theater are all here. Kir and Brooklyn got here first, and even though my friends are all seriously concerned about me, it's *him* who insisted on throwing his weight around as—apparently—a major donor to the hospital to get me moved to the VIP floor. He's also got his own personal doctor checking me out and has already informed me that he's flying his go-to neurological surgeon in from London to examine me…a Dr. Crowley, who's apparently world-renowned.

Fucking friends in high places, right?

Annoyingly, my own fucking brother is not here. He did send me a couple of texts telling me he's glad I'm okay, though.

I swear, that fucking guy…

On the one hand, it's amazing to have a brother I never knew existed. On the other…it'd be fucking nice if he *acted* like one.

Everyone's fawning over me, making sure I'm feeling okay and that the pillows are fluffy enough—spoiler: they are. The VIP floor of the hospital is *very* fucking nice, thank you very much Kir.

But even as they all fuss over me, I pick up my cracked phone and tap on a certain contact.

My brow darkens when I re-read the last texts from Roman, including that outrageously hot, *clearly* alcohol-fueled pic of him in a hot tub looking like a goddamn snack.

I still haven't texted him back. Not this time. Snack or not, just…*no*.

I don't have time or space in my life for him or his shit. He can stay the fuck out of my life from now on.

"VAL!"

The door flies open and Evie comes streaking into the room like a pink bat out of hell.

“Am I allowed to hug you?!”

I grin as I open my arms. “Hell yeah, Eves. I’d love one.”

I wince when she wraps her arms around me and squeezes *a little* too tight for my ribs’ liking. But I hug her back anyway, a smile melting over my face.

…Until I look past her shoulder and see who’s lurking in the doorway, looking *way* too fucking good. He’s dressed like he just came from a nice dinner, leaning against the door frame, rubbing a bulging bicep with the opposite hand.

“I…I uh, drove her,” he grunts in answer to the question I didn’t ask.

He’s *here*.

And goddammit…

I don’t hate it.

At all.

Evie joins the chorus of people making sure I have plenty of ice chips to suck on, or enough pain meds.

Spoiler: I’m fucking *great* for pain meds right now.

But even as they all stay crowded around my bed, fretting and worrying, my gaze drifts past them, to *him*.

He doesn’t say anything to me, and I don’t say anything to him. Not out loud.

But the unspoken words that flicker between our gazes? That’s another story.

And he’s *here*.

He came.

Eventually, my nurse Tracy comes in and says everyone has to leave so they can run some more tests. Everyone says their goodbyes, and Tracy starts ushering them out.

“Actually…” She tugs on Roman’s wrist. “Can I use you for a second?”

My jaw clenches.

That’s my job, bitch.

Whoa. Where the *fuck* did that come from?

“Sorry,” Tracy apologizes. “The casters on this bed stick and I need to move—”

“No problem,” Roman says in that deep, sexy baritone. He turns to Evie, who smiles. “I’ll be in the waiting room with everyone else. Meet you down there?”

Roman nods and then steps back into the room with Tracy.

“It’s the bottom left side one,” she sighs, pointing to that corner of my bed. “Sorry to ask, but you’re…well…” She grins, blushing a little as she eyes him.

Back. The fuck. Off. Cunt.

Roman chuckles easily. “No problem. Where’s he going?”

“Just to the other side of the room, a little closer to the window. So the machine can reach.”

“Got it.”

Roman gently moves Tracy out of the way before he grabs the foot of the bed. I watch eagerly as his arm muscles fucking *bulge* when he grits his teeth and gives the bed a sharp yank. Then he drags it across the floor—with me in it—to where it needs to go.

“How’s here?”

“*Perfect*!” Tracy says. She puts her hand on his arm and giggles.

Fucking *giggles*.

Bitch…

“I’m so glad you were here!” she gushes, squeezing his arm. “You’re so strong!”

Roman just smiles.

I picture heavy objects falling from orbit and reducing Tracy to Jello.

“I hate to ask…” She winces. “I need to ask another favor. Would you mind waiting here for a minute? I need to check with our x-ray tech about your friend's scans, but I can’t leave him alone since he’s not hooked up to a monitor yet. Do you mind?”

My eyes swivel to Roman. He swallows.

“Not at all,” he blurts. “Yeah.” He smiles. “I can for sure stay with him.”

“Great, thanks. Back in ten or so.”

The door shuts behind her, and then we’re alone: me in this hospital bed, him standing right next to me.

“So…” He laughs nervously. “Tracy’s a bit of a flirt, huh—”

“What are you doing here, Roman,” I grunt.

His smile falters and drops. “I…I drove my sister.”

Yeah, not the answer I was looking for.

“Cool,” I say dryly.

“And…I was worried about you.”

My pulse skips a beat as my eyes snap to his.

Did he for real just say that out loud?

“Why,” I growl. “Why were you worried about me.”

He looks away, rubbing the back of his head. “I… I dunno. Because I’m a human being? With empathy?”

I smirk. “That empathy stop you from killing people or beating them up?”

“Not really.”

My brow lifts. “Then I’m touched.”

He grins a goofy, adorable smile, then blushes when I wink at him.

“How do you feel?” he asks, turning serious.

“Like I got ridden hard and put away wet, and not in the fun way.”

Roman smiles. “What happened?”

“Some fucker cut me off. I swerved, skidded out, and slammed into a crosswalk post at the corner of Broadway and Houston.”

“*Christ*,” he growls. “Fuck, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah…”

I trail off, and the room goes silent.

“Look, I’m…”

“Don’t.”

Roman frowns. “I want to apologize for—”

“For attacking me? For *hitting* me?”

“I…” He sighs, looking at the floor. “That was fucked up.”

“No shit.”

His eyes snap to mine. “You got some pretty good hits in yourself.”

“Eh, you can take it.”

My lips pull into a grin, and his do the same.

“You throw a pretty fucking good punch,” he murmurs quietly.

“Thanks. I know.”

He grins. “Where’d you learn to fight like that?”

“Foster care.”

He nods. “Right, Evie’s mentioned that.” His brow furrows, and I watch as he rests his tattooed hands on the edge of my bed. “That must have been tough.”

I shrug. “When you’re a queer kid who dances ballet, you learn to fight pretty fucking fast. But also…I think… I kinda like it. Fighting, I mean. Weird, right?”

Roman shakes his head. “Not so weird. I’ve boxed for years as…I dunno… self-help or therapy or whatever.” He shrugs. “I’ve always liked street fighting, too.”

“I’ll take that love tap of yours as a compliment, then.”

He chuckles quietly.

“So…” He clears his throat. “What now?”

“I’m sure you've got time to give me a sponge bath before Tracy gets back.”

He blushes deeply. “I meant…”

“I know what you meant,” I murmur. I take a deep breath. “You meant now what with *us*.”

Roman’s face turns red and he looks down at his hands, which start twisting the bedsheets.

“Well…I… I don’t know. Yeah, I guess.”

“You *guess*, or that’s what you meant.”

Slowly, he drags his gaze up to my eyes. “*That’s what I mean*,” he whispers.

“Ask the question, Roman,” I growl.

He exhales quickly as his eyes dart all around the room. “I—fuck, I don’t know. What is this?”

“Define *this*.”

His eyes finally come to rest on me. “*This*,” he murmurs, pointing first at me, then at himself.

I shrug. “I genuinely have no fucking idea. But…”

He tenses but doesn’t pull back when I put my hand on his.

“But I like whatever it is,” I growl, tightening my grip. He twists his hand, and slowly, our inked fingers intertwine.

“*Me too*,” he murmurs. His brows knit. “But I’m really not gay, Val.”

Jesus fuck.

“You moaning and groaning and grabbing my hair while I suck your cock says otherwise, friend.”

Roman’s face turns *purple*, his jaw dropping wide as he stares at me like I’ve just brought down tablets from the Mount.

“I…I just…” He pauses. “It’s just an external stimulus…”

I snort a genuine laugh. “Are you fucking serious right now?”

“It feels good, that’s all,” he blurts.

“No, Roman,” I growl, tightening my grip on his hand. “That’s *not* all. That’s the whole point. You’re saying you’d get the same way if a *girl* had you on your knees with your mouth on her pussy?”

He makes a face somewhere between angry and disgusted.

“What if we skip the labels for now, Roman, and just let it be whatever it is.”

I think it’s safe to say I know what I’m talking about. I know the straight ones, and I know the bi ones. And *this* motherfucker isn’t remotely confident enough in himself or his sexuality to go the bi route.

Nope, Roman Nikitin is gay as *fuck*. At least, gay for *me*, which is all I really give a shit about. Because I’m maybe, possibly, fucking obsessed with him.

Roman’s brow furrows. “I’m getting *married*, Val.”

“Do you fuck her?” There’s a glint in my eye when I say it, and I *know* the motherfucker sees it.

“No,” Roman says, shaking his head. “I’ve never touched her.”

“She ever touched *you*?” I growl, feeling the glint in my eyes get a little more vicious as a murderous feeling twists and coils inside of me.

“*No*,” Roman says, shaking his head. “No, never.”

“*Good*,” I growl. “Keep it that way.”

I love the little smile that creeps over his jaw when I say it. Then he sucks his lip between his teeth.

“You’re glossing over the part where I’m engaged—”

“Do you *want* to marry her?”

“No. Obviously.”

“She want to marry you?”

Roman smirks. “I doubt it.”

“But you probably can’t stop it from happening.”

“Val—”

“Roman.” His cheeks turn red again when I squeeze his hand. “Leave it to me.”

He frowns. “Whoa, hang on—”

He gasps as I pull him close, using his misbalance from leaning over the bed to make him fall toward me. He catches himself, but it puts him right in my face.

He shudders when I reach up and cup his jaw.

“I know you get hard for me,” I purr. “And I get *real* hard for you, little wreckage.”

His eyes widen. A cute little breathless *huughn* sound tumbles from his lips.

"*Val—*"

"It's your fault, Roman. You got me all addicted to you, the fucking taste of you, your scent, and the way you submit. How you crave being put in your place."

And then…

He *groans*, in that sexy, deep and yet slightly whimpering way that makes me fucking lose it, every time.

His throat works, his breath catching. "I—I should go meet Evie."

I nod.

Yes, he should. Because if he stays here any longer, I can't be held responsible for any damage I do to myself climbing out of this bed and fucking him *in it*.

"Before you go, you need to do something for me."

His brows knit. "What's that?"

"Admit what you are."

Roman frowns and starts to open his mouth to protest, but then he shuts up.

Because I kiss him. *Hard*.

He tenses at first, but when my tongue slides into his mouth and demands to play with his, he fucking comes *alive*. He groans into my lips, kissing me just as hungrily as I do him, and by the time we pull apart he's panting, a look of pure need on face.

"I don't give a shit what you call yourself," I murmur into his lips. "Gay, bi, questioning, *whatever*. You can even tell yourself you're straight, for all I care."

He whimpers—fucking *whimpers*—when I grab his jaw and pull him close.

"But you know what you are, un-fucking-equivocally?"

Roman shivers, gasping quietly when I drag my thumb over his bottom lip and kiss it.

"*Mine*."

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19

VAL

"How're you feeling?"

All things considered? I feel fucking *amazing*.

Kir seriously did me a solid with the VIP treatment at the hospital. My room is huge and has a great view, the food is amazing, the bed adjusts five billion different ways, and I've got friends like Brooklyn, Naomi, and Evie stopping by to fawn over me and make sure I'm comfortable. Hell, even Madame Kuzmina called me this morning, saying she hopes I'm back on my feet soon.

Hell hath frozen over, apparently.

So, to answer Brooklyn's question, I'm great. At least, I should be great. So why do I feel like something is missing?

And why do I already know *exactly* how that correlates to the fact that Roman hasn't been back since the night I was admitted, two nights ago?

Normally, I'd have been discharged the next morning. But with my history of memory loss, they're keeping me under observation for an extra two nights.

Also, I get the impression Kir gives enough money to this place that when he asks them to make accommodations for someone, they roll out the red carpet and go to town.

"Fine," I shrug as I smile at Brooklyn. "Really."

“Well, I’m glad they’re keeping you one more night,” Evelina says, taking my hand and squeezing it gently.

“I mean…” I grin as I glance around the opulent room that I swear is bigger than my first apartment. “Can’t really complain.” I nod my chin at Brooklyn. “Please tell Kir thank you again. I seriously owe him.”

She shrugs, waving me off. “Nah, you don’t.”

“You're *sure* there’s nothing I can do to pay him back?”

“Val, it’s fine.”

“Homemade cookies?”

She laughs, rolling her eyes.

“Signed eight-by-ten glossy?”

Brooklyn snorts loudly.

“Lap dance?”

“*Hey*. Don’t push it.”

I chuckle at her immediate scowl. “Okay, how about I have *you* give BDE a lap dance for me.”

Her scowl turns to a grin. “That, I can do.”

“When do you think you’ll be back at the theater?” Evelina says gently, her brow furrowing. “And will you be getting physical therapy?”

Only if it’s your brother giving it.…

I shake my head. “Nah. I’ll do some extra weight training on my right leg to strengthen the stabilizers there, since that’s where I got hit. But I should be back in about two weeks.” My brow furrows. “Forget me, though. How’s your father?”

She lifts a shoulder. “He’s…okay, I guess. He wasn’t hurt, thankfully, and neither was Bane’s dad. But…” Her mouth twists. “He’s been extra grouchy and mean lately. And his temper is even worse…”

I put my hand on hers. “Sorry, Evie.”

Brooklyn sighs. “Hey, I’m going to grab a latte. The VIP floor coffee shop is *amazing*. You guys want anything?”

I shake my head. So does Evie.

“Be right back.”

Evelina watches Brooklyn leave. When the door closes, she turns back to me, her brows knit.

“You okay?” I ask gently.

She hesitates, looking like she’s trying to find the right words, or deciding if she should even speak at all.

“Evie—”

“I heard my father talking with his number two Stepan last night,” she suddenly blurts, still not meeting my eyes. “About the explosion.” Her lip pulls between her teeth. “Your…” She pauses and swallows.

“Hey.” I sit up and take her hand. “You can tell me anything. Seriously.”

“I know there’s something…not *great* between my father and your brother. Some kind of business thing, I think?”

She means the Sangrini connection, and that Dasha Lukashova was once engaged to Vaughn.

“Yeah, I don’t….” I shake my head. “I try not to get involved with Vaughn’s business stuff. But what’s up?”

She takes a shaky breath and finally drags her worried eyes to mine. “My father… He thinks your brother and the Syndicate are behind the attack.”

A cold chill drags up my spine. Not at the accusation, but because my first reaction isn’t to deny it and say “Vaughn would never do that”.

He one hundred percent *would*.

I’m still getting to know my older brother, and we have a lifetime of catching up to do. But I’ve learned a few concrete truths about him these past few months. One is that the Syndicate comes first. Period. It and its interests are paramount, and everything else—including a long lost younger brother—is second tier.

But would my brother actually try to *assassinate* someone if it was in his and the Obsidian Syndicate’s interests?

Magic eight ball says “probably”, which brings me to point number two, with a bullet, that I’ve learned about him in these last few months:

Vaughn *might actually be a sociopath*.

Like, literally.

He’s not a violent rampaging monster, but that’s the point. He’s quietly, brilliantly calculating. He knows *exactly* what to say, how to act, how to appear more forceful or more subservient depending on the situation. He can feed an ego or cross someone off his hit list without blinking an eye, and I don’t think he loses a wink of sleep over either.

Short answer?

I think Vaughn is *perfectly* capable of trying to bomb Pavel Nikitin.

“*God*, I’m sorry.” Evie’s face scrunches up. “That was super rude of me—”

“It’s really not.”

“No, I mean I just came in and started accusing your brother—”

“*Hey*.” I take her hand in mine and smile. “It’s totally fine. I’m not offended. Let me talk to him, okay?”

She nods slowly. “*Okay*,” she says quietly. Then her brows pinch again. “But… Do you really think he’s capable of something like that?”

“Who's capable of *what*, Ms. Nikitin?”

Evelina starts, her spine snapping straight as my gaze darts past her.

Vaughn stands in the doorway. Evie's throat works as she slowly turns to him.

"I—" The single syllable lodges in her throat as my brother levels a cool, icy, and—yeah, I'll be honest—slightly unhinged look at her.

"I'm waiting, Evelina," he says quietly.

"Girl talk," I grunt. "Evie's having a fling with this hot fucking guy, and she's got questions."

Evie frowns, looking at me in confusion. "I'm not seeing any—"

"*Real* hot motherfucker," I enunciate loudly. "*Huuuuge* dick."

Evelina turns as pink as her cardigan as her gaze shifts between me and my brother.

Vaughn looks utterly unruffled. "I see." He turns to Evie. "Ms. Nikitin, I was hoping to have a word in private with my brother."

I glare at him. "You can wait your fucking turn until—"

"No, I…" Evie smiles weakly, still blushing. "I should be going anyway. Rehearsal," she explains with a shrug. She smiles at me. "If you need *anything*—"

"You'll be the first one I call, promise," I wink. "Hey, have fun with your hot lover's huge fucking dong."

She literally turns crimson, her eyes bulging at me before she sucks in a breath and turns to leave. She smiles weakly at Vaughn and dips her head to him as she starts to walk past.

"Ms. Nikitin."

Her steps stutter and she comes to a shivering stop by the door.

"I was sorry to hear about your father," he growls quietly. "I hope he's doing well after the…unfortunate incident?"

Evelina's shoulders stiffen, her hands clenching at her sides. She hesitantly starts to turn, her face pale as she glances at me, then at Vaughn.

“*Thank you*,” she croaks. “He’s—”

“Fine. Just fine,” I growl tightly, looking directly at Vaughn. “Evie has to go now, but thank so much for your concern, *brother*.”

Vaughn levels a cold smile at Evelina that makes her visibly tremble. She shoots me a furtive look, then quickly leaves the room.

“You *motherfucker*,” I snarl, springing out of bed.

Fuck my leg. Fuck my cuts and bruises. Fuck my concussion, and fuck the sensors still wired to my chest. I surge at Vaughn, but he meets me halfway, catching me by the shoulder and keeping me at arm's length.

“*Relax*,” he growls, his face darkening. “You’re going to hurt yourself, idiot.”

“What the *fuck* was that!” I hiss, jamming my finger in the direction of the door.

He looks at me blankly. “That was politics, brother.”

“No, that was intimidation and you being a fuckhead to my *friend*,” I seethe.

Vaughn sighs, shaking his head. “Do me a favor and sit, okay?”

He guides me back to the bed and helps me down onto the edge of it.

“There, I’m fucking sitting,” I snap. “Now tell me what the fuck your problem is with Evelina.”

His brows lift. “Nothing.” He shrugs. “With her father, however, it becomes more complicated.”

“Was it you?!” I hiss.

Vaughn's expression is somewhere between bored and amused.

“You mean was I involved in blowing up Pavel Nikitin’s safe house, almost killing him and Nikolai Antonov?”

“I’m not asking if you were *involved*, fucker,” I snarl. “I’m asking if you *did it*.”

He’s silent a moment, looking at me curiously, his face utterly blank.

“Do you think I’m capable of that?”

“Yep.”

He stares at me thoughtfully. “Quick answer.”

“It wasn’t the first time I’ve considered the question,” I fire back.

Vaughn smiles, adjusting the lapels of his perfectly tailored dark gray suit.

“The Obsidian Syndicate doesn’t bother itself with petty mafia drama, Val.”

I laugh coldly. “Petty? You almost killed her fucking father.”

“Have you *met* Pavel Nikitin?”

“Yes,” I growl.

Vaughn chuckles. “Real prince, isn’t he?”

“You don’t get to fucking blow people up because they’re assholes,” I growl. “Unfortunate as that may be.”

“Pavel and I might have our eyes on the same long-term goal. But—”

“Is this about Dasha Lukashova?” I mutter. “That it? What are you, a jilted ex getting all emo about her marrying Roman?”

Vaughn grins widely and starts to chuckle. “Do you think I'm the emo type?”

“You want me to tell you *exactly* what type I think you are sometimes?”

“Heartless, calculating, driven by a need for control, with Machiavellian and narcissistic tendencies and a possible psychotic resentment of humanity?”

I scowl. Vaughn smiles wider.

“Was that close, Val? Or is there something else you want to add?”

“I think you pretty much covered it,” I growl.

My brother sighs and steps to where I’m sitting on the bed. He bends down, rests his hands on my knees, and looks me in the eye.

“I had nothing to do with what happened at Pavel’s safe house, Val. Firebombing buildings in the middle of densely populated urban areas isn’t my style. Far too messy, to be honest.”

I eye him warily. “Were you a part of it?”

He shakes his head. “No. Nor was anyone else in the Syndicate. Does that address your concerns?”

I glare at him. “So why fuck with Evie, insinuating that you did.”

He smiles quietly. “Because planting little black seeds and watching them grow into nightmares and monsters that jump from the most paranoid parts of your mind is what I do best, Val.”

“Stay the fuck away from Evelina,” I hiss. “She’s not part of whatever game you’re trying to play with Pavel. She’s off fucking limits. *All* my friends are, but her especially. Got it?”

He tips his head to the side, peering at me closely before he shrugs. “Got it.”

“I’m fucking serious, Vaughn. Evie is not a pawn in whatever chess game you’re playing with Pavel. Is that clear?”

He smiles and pats my knee as he stands. “Understood. You satisfied now?”

I suck on my teeth. “Swear it.”

“On what?”

I frown. “On…I dunno…our childhood.”

He smirks. “Exactly *what* is sacred about our childhood?”

“You’re asking the wrong guy.”

He laughs. “Fine. I swear on our childhood…swear what, exactly?”

“That neither you nor the Syndicate had anything to do with that bombing.”

Vaughn holds a hand over his heart and raises the other one like he's taking an oath. “Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye. I swear, Val.”

I nod curtly. “Well…okay then.”

He smiles appreciatively as he turns to drink in the room. “Nice digs.”

“Thanks. And thanks for coming…finally,” I mutter.

Vaughn's mouth twists as he steps closer to me and puts a hand on my shoulder. “I should have come earlier. I apologize. I’m…new to this sort of thing. I didn’t *have* a brother for twenty years.”

“Neither did I, jerk,” I grumble, smirking. “How about we don’t forget that?”

“Deal.”

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20

ROMAN

HE'S FUCKING *INSANE*.

My pulse thuds heavily, my skin tingling as I re-read the text that's just popped up on my phone.

VAL

I've been dreaming about your cock.

I've had girls sext me before—nudes, flirty messages, whatever. It's part of the game, and I play it when it comes up, even if I feel that I'm—I'll admit it—forcing it a little.

It's something I've been trying to come to a reckoning with as this…*thing* with Val becomes more and more difficult to ignore, or write off, or pretend was just a biological reaction, or me being drunk, or any other patently stupid excuse.

The truth is, when he touches me or even looks at me the way he does…I like it.

A lot.

I like it so much that it's all I want, and all I think about later, after he's gone or I've pushed him away and stormed off like an angsty teenager trying to "figure myself out".

I'm twenty-nine fucking years old. I shouldn't be "figuring out" anything. I should know who I am by now. I goddamn *did*, before that asshole barged

into my life.

But now I'm stuck with this…*thing* lurking in the back of my mind that stares back at me when I look in the mirror, whispering "*queer*" or "*pidoraz*" into my ear.

You're a sissy.

You're weak.

You're not fit to lead the Bratva with a perversion like yours corrupting your thoughts.

Be a fucking MAN.

And even when the voice in my head isn't trying to tear me apart from the inside—when it grows tired of going scorched-earth on me—it's still there, whispering quietly as I try and fall asleep.

Are you gay?

Well…ARE you?

And I never have an answer. Not a yes. But not a no, either.

I don't know.

My phone dings again. I glance at it, and my face instantly heats when I see the new text.

VAL

My dick misses you, wreckage.

Fucking hell. I should *hate* that nickname. Except…I don't.

"Because you wreck me."

No one's ever had a nickname for me. I mean, I've had girls call me babe, or sexy, or whatever. But those never sent little flutters of heat through my chest, or triggered a slithering, coiling sensation deep inside.

My phone dings again, and this time, my jaw hits the floor.

VAL

See? ;-)

The image fills my phone screen, and I feel raw need tug at me.

It’s a picture of his dick.

His *very* erect, thick, fucking huge dick.

Actually, “dick” isn't really the right word.

Val has a fucking *cock*.

And when my first thought after that is “and a goddamn beautiful one, too”, the thing inside me snarls and points, laughing.

ME

Why did you send me that

VAL

Ideally, to turn you on

VAL

How’d I do :D

I bite my lip, my pulse skipping erratically.

ME

Not so great. It does nothing for me.

VAL

You’re so cute when you lie

I carefully ignore how much I’m grinning like an idiot as I type back.

ME

Sorry. Wasted on me.

VAL

Doesn’t turn you on at all…

ME

Nope.

VAL

How about now?

Jesus.

The next image that comes through is another shot of his cock. But this time, he's holding the camera a little further away, so I can also see his grooved abs, those fucking v-lines diving down his hips, his tattoos…and the fact that his other hand is wrapped around the base of his dick, squeezing. A tantalizing drop of white precum beads at the head.

And *my cock* immediately twitches.

Thickens. Grows. Starts to fucking tent the front of my pants.

ME

Still nothing.

VAL

lol, liar.

Another picture comes through. He's lying in a bed, though obviously not a hospital bed, and I can see exposed brick, high factory windows, and beam ceilings beyond the immediate foreground image of his cock.

ME

You're out of the hospital?!

VAL

Fuck, THAT is your takeaway from that pic?

I grin.

VAL

Nice dodge, BTW. Any physical response of the dick variety from that last one?

ME

Lemme check. No, sorry.

Christ, I think I'm flirting.

VAL

Final offer

This time, it's a video. I'd love to say that I "almost don't hit play" or that I "put the phone down and only come back once I've built up my courage."

The truth is, I don’t think I could have hit the play button faster.

And holy. *Fuck*.

On screen, Val is groaning in a deeply masculine, sexy-as-fuck way as he strokes his gorgeous cock. His big, tattooed hand squeezes the base, with *so fucking much* of his cock still sticking out. Precum leaks freely from his swollen head, slowly dripping down his twitching cock. He slides his hand down to cup his big, heavy balls, and when his cock pulses and more precum seeps from his crown, there’s no pretending the sound that escapes from my throat is anything but a needy fucking *moan*.

VAL

well?

I shift in my seat as my huge erection throbs against my thigh.

ME

Nada. Sorry.

VAL

prove it.

I blink.

ME

What?

VAL

Fucking prove it. If my dick doesn’t do it for you, take a picture of yours showing me how totally not rock-hard it is right now. Then I’ll know you’re not gay.

ME

lol sending you a dick pic to prove I’m not gay makes ZERO sense.

VAL

Fine. Whatever. Busted. I honestly just wanted you to show me your gorgeous cock again.

A heated throb teases through me, making my dick twitch and pulse against my thigh.

VAL

Relax, wreckage. Zero part of me thinks you would ever actually send me something like that.

But I was thinking about it…

VAL

So… Call off your sham marriage yet?

ME

Is that a serious question?

VAL

Mm…kind of? You don't want to marry her, she doesn't want to marry you. I fail to see why either of you would go through with this.

VAL

And let's not forget that you get hard and achy for DICK.

Heat sizzles through me.

ME

It's obviously more complicated than that, and no, I haven't.

VAL

All good. I did tell you not to worry about it. I've got it handled.

My shoulders tense.

ME

Why do I feel like I need to tell you not to do anything crazy

VAL

lol I'm gonna go with because you've met me?

I slowly scroll back through our conversation. My gaze lingers on the pics, and when I replay the video, my erection bulges painfully in my pants.

Christ, the fuck is wrong with me.

VAL

I lose your interest over there?

ME

No. Sorry.

ME

Your place looks really nice.

VAL

Thanks. It's new. I've barely stocked the fridge, but it's home.

The exchange goes silent for a few seconds, until…

VAL

Come over and see it.

* * *

VAL SMIRKS when he opens the door. "Well, well, well…"

Fucking hell. Why does that sound like both a taunt and a come on?

Yes, I came over. I told myself it was his comment about not even having a stocked fridge. That I'm just…I dunno…a good neighbor or some shit.

"A friend".

Right.

Because I always take a shower, shave, and try five different outfits before going over to my *friends*' places.

"Don't read anything into it," I grunt, pushing past him into the stunning apartment. I heft the grocery bags. "Just brought you some shit."

"Aww, and they say chivalry is dead."

I ignore the way his gaze sizzles over me as I look around the huge open space and head toward the kitchen area, built under a lofted living room. Val immediately starts pawing through the bags after I set them down. He grins as he holds up a package of tortillas, some shredded cheese, steak marinating in adobo, avocados…

"You brought me burrito fixings?!"

I grin, shrugging. "Burritos are awesome."

“*Agreed*,” he nods, setting the food down and rifling through more bags. He gives me a look as he pulls out a large bottle of vodka.

I shrug again. “What? Didn’t know what you did and didn’t have.”

“Yes,” Val smirks. “Wouldn’t want to be without a bottle of *vodka* to wash down my hardcore pain meds. That seems…safe.”

I roll my eyes. “I didn’t know if—”

“You were worried I might not have booze at my house…”

My jaw grinds as I glance at him. “Something you want to say?”

He shrugs. “Plenty, but you won’t want to hear it.”

“Try me.”

Val eyes me a moment. “Fine, fuck it. You drink a lot.”

“I’m *Russian*.”

He cocks a brow. “Is that your answer?”

“Did you have a question?”

He exhales, sighing. “Clearly not something you want to discuss.”

“I don’t know what there is *to* discuss. I enjoy having a drink. Shoot me.”

“I think the issue might be that you don’t just enjoy having *a* drink.”

“You know, I could just take my shit and go,” I growl.

“I’d rather you didn't.”

My face heats at the earnest, straightforward way he says it.

“Any more comments, then?”

Val smiles, shaking his head. “Nah, I’m good for now.”

“Awesome.”

I help him put away the groceries. Then I turn to check out his place properly. It's…*really* nice.

“This apartment is *sick*, by the way.”

Val grins as he leans against the fridge, wincing a little when he crosses his arms over his chest. “I know, right?”

“Vaughn?”

His face sours instantly. “I don’t take handouts.”

“Oh, I—” I stumble over my words. “I wasn’t insinuating—”

“You kinda were.”

I smile as I look down. “I just…like, this place is out of reach on a dancer’s salary, right?” I raise my head, eyes dragging to his. “So, your brother…”

“Pays me a salary to do occasional work for him,” Val says crisply.

I think back to that night at Vaughn’s mountain retreat, where Val appeared to be…I don’t know. One of the guards? One of the Obsidian Syndicate men?

“What sort of work?”

He rolls his eyes with a lazy grin. “Don’t lecture me, Roman. I know how your family keeps the lights on.”

“I’m just curious,” I say quickly.

“Relax, I’m not gonna be a hitman anytime soon,” he winks. “Don’t worry your pretty head, wreckage.”

Fucking fuck.

Why is that name growing on me?

Val grabs the last few cans of beans off the counter and turns to open a cupboard above the fridge. Then he winces loudly, his face twisting in pain.

“*Fuck*.”

Before I even realize it, I've crossed the kitchen to him.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, just…" He scowls and suddenly pulls off his shirt, right in front of me.

His gorgeous, sculpted shoulders flex and the tattoos down his arms ripple as he lifts them and glances at the bandage around his middle.

"These fucking bandages," he grumbles. "Always coming loose and pulling at my skin like a motherfucker." He sighs. "I should go change them. Make yourself at home."

Val slips past me, close enough that my knuckles brush his arm. Then he heads across the main open space of the loft and down a hallway, presumably to his room. I wait in the kitchen and pour myself a drink, sipping slowly and walking around the main space, eyeing the brick walls and huge factory windows enviously.

"*Fuck*! *Shit! MotherFUCKer!*"

The response is as immediate as before. One second I'm stationary, the next I'm bolting down the hall as if a kitten needs rescuing from a burning building.

"Well, hi."

I stumble to a stop in the bedroom doorway. Val's standing by a floor-length mirror, his beautiful torso twisted as he awkwardly tries to bandage his ribs.

And he's naked.

Okay, not *naked*, but as well as being without the shirt he tossed away in the kitchen, he's now also *sans* pants. He's standing in front of the mirror in just a tight pair of black boxer-briefs that mold to every fucking inch of his ass. And in the front, which I can see in the mirror's reflection…

My face heats.

I don't *think* he's even hard, but his cock looks fucking *huge*, bulging at the front of his briefs.

Christ, his body.

It’s fucking work of art. Sculpted, lean, yet muscled as hell. I’m built like a tank, but *fuck*. This motherfucker's abs are on another level. The tattoos swirling over his skin only add more forbidden heat to the whole picture.

Over his chest and shoulders, up his neck. Down his muscled arms. My eyes slowly drag over every inch of him, pausing here and there on a certain tattoo—the dragon near his ribs. The phoenix on his hip. Even one weird one on the back of one arm—this scrawled looking thing of chaotic and random ink.

“See something you like?”

My face throbs with heat, my eyes snapping from his dick to his face.

“I—”

“Come here.”

The room goes silent. Slowly, Val turns to me, wrapping the last of his bandage around his ribs and taping it in place. His head tilts to the side, every muscle in his body slowly coiling like a snake getting ready to strike.

Slowly, the bulge in his briefs begins to thicken, harden, lengthen. It pulses and then swells, until he’s rock hard in front of me.

“I said…” He looks right at me with those piercing blue eyes as he turns his palm up and crooks two fingers. “*Come. Here*.”

It's like I’m in a trance. Or drugged. Except I’m not. I’m just walking of my own free will—eagerly—toward him when he beckons.

Helpless to stop. Knowing I won’t.

“I—I thought you were hurt—”

“Did you, now.”

I stop a foot away from him. Our eyes lock as the room pulses and fills with heat, like there’s an electric current crackling and sizzling between us.

I nod, my head feeling heavy and slow, my limbs twitchy and anxious. My chest tightening.

…My dick swelling.

“That really why you came in here, wreckage?” he purrs quietly.

He closes the last of the distance between us, making me gasp when his chest pushes against mine.

Breathing his breath. Drowning in the delicious, clean, masculine scent of him. His hips roll, and I can't stop the moan that flutters from my throat as his thick fucking cock grinds against mine.

“You’re *hard*,” he murmurs.

“I…” I swallow. “I—I need a drink—”

“No, you don’t.”

He grabs my belt and unbuckles it. My head swims, my breath coming faster as he boldly tugs it off. His fingertips skim the strip of exposed skin between my t-shirt and the waist of my pants, slipping just underneath and popping the button.

I feel every tooth of my zipper vibrate through me as he pulls it down.

“I—”

“You don’t need a fucking drink, wreckage,” he growls, sliding his hand over my jaw. His fingers thread into my hair, tugging it to bring his face closer to mine. “You need *me*.”

His mouth crushes to mine, and I melt. His perfect, soft yet not at all feminine lips nibble and suck, his tongue demanding entrance. I whimper when it finally pushes into my mouth, twirling and dancing with my own until I’m fucking lost in the moment.

He tugs at the back of my hair, pulling me tighter against him as his hand slides over the bulge in my boxers.

“*Fuck*, do I love your cock,” he groans into my lips. “I fucking *need* it.”

I gasp when he slips my boxers down, and my thick erection springs free.

"*Shit*, wreckage," he growls as he wraps his hand around me, fisting my cock as I moan loudly. "This fucking *dick*," he hisses.

I don't even know what's happening as I fumble my hand down and grab his erection. Jesus Christ, he's so fucking big, and when my hand slides over the obscenely bulged front of his briefs, I feel him twitch against my palm. His sticky, wet precum floods my hand, and I groan.

I need more.

I yank his briefs down and shudder as I wrap my fingers around his cock. He's so fucking huge my hand can't even wrap around him, and when he starts to stroke me, I do the same to him, matching his rhythm.

"*Shit*, Roman," he groans, kissing me again. "You—"

This time it's me who shuts *him* up as I sear my lips to his. Val growls deeply, the masculine rumble humming in my chest as he kisses me back.

"I fucking want you," he rasps, his teeth raking over my lip.

"*I'm all fucking yours*," I choke.

"*I know*."

I'm barely aware of him easing us backward, my feet shuffling as my jeans drop to my ankles. I feel the edge of the bed behind me, and gasp when he suddenly shoves me down across it.

I stare at him with pure fucking lust as he pushes his briefs down his thighs and kicks them off, standing there totally naked in front of me, his gorgeous, huge dick curving up toward his abs.

Jesus, he's beautiful.

I've never thought of a guy as "beautiful," but there's seriously no other way to describe him.

I gasp quietly, my chest heaving as he reaches for me. He pulls my jeans off one leg at a time, tosses them away, then hooks his fingers into the boxers at my knees. I quickly yank my shirt off as he pulls those down, too.

Then, we're just looking at each other—me lying across the bed, him standing between my thighs—both naked, hard, and *ravenous*.

"I—" I pause. "I don't…I..." I frown. "I don't know what happens now."

"Now, wreckage," Val growls as he moves onto the bed, his legs on either side of mine, his hand lazily stroking his dick, "I'm going to *fuck you*."

Holy fuck.

My body jolts and buzzes, my skin pulsing.

"I—how come…" I stop, then try again. "Why isn't it *me* fucking you?"

Val's lips curl devilishly at the corners. "Do *you* know how to fuck a guy?"

I feel my face tingle with heat.

"I know how to fuck a girl—*ohhh.*…"

I gasp as he wraps his hand around my cock and starts stroking languidly up and down, turning me to putty in his grip.

"Please don't tell me you think it's the same…"

Before I can answer, he lowers his mouth, and I gasp when he swirls his tongue around the swollen, achingly hard head of my cock.

"What's happening now, wreckage…" He gives me one more slow lick before sliding up my body, hovering over me, our dicks rubbing together as he lowers his chest to mine, our lips barely brushing.

"…is that *I'm* fucking you. And after I do?"

A choked cry of pleasure rips from my throat as his cock drags against mine.

"*You'll never be the same.*"

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ROMAN

THERE'S a madness in the way we explosively crash into each other. His mouth attacks mine, his hands grabbing my wrists and pinning them over my head.

But it's my jangling, explosive *eagerness* for this that really sends me reeling. I mean, I've *wanted* sex before. I've gone home with girls and felt the excitement and the buildup.

But it's never been a *fraction* as intense as this. Ever.

I gasp when Val's teeth sink into my neck, biting *hard* and dragging a cry from my lips.

"*Fuck*…"

"Ohhh, not yet. I'm just getting *started*, wreckage," he growls, attacking my neck again. His hand wraps around my dick, squeezing as I writhe and moan under him, my body arching of its own volition and pressing up against him, *needing* the friction of his body against mine.

Val slides down my torso, his mouth licking and biting and sucking down my chest, leaving marks that make me gasp for more. He nibbles one nipple, then the other, making my back arch again as I groan and grind my hips against him.

"*Eager* boy," he growls against my abs, dragging his tongue over them as he slides lower. "Did you want me to pay attention to this big, hard dick?"

“*Please…*”

“I will never get tired of hearing that word from your fucking mouth.”

He slides lower, wrapping his fingers around my cock and pushing it up to stroke it against my abs. His eyes lock with mine as his tongue darts out, teasing and swirling over my balls as I hiss through my teeth.

“These feel so fucking full for me, baby,” he groans, nuzzling my balls with his mouth and pulling one of them between his lips. I gasp sharply, my hips bucking as he sucks wetly on it. “I’m going to milk every fucking drop out of them.”

My jaw goes slack as he drags his tongue up the underside of my cock, inch by inch, until his mouth suddenly slips over the crown and around my shaft.

Fuck…

I turn to fucking jelly as Val groans around my dick, taking me into the back of his throat. He pushes deeper, and I go cross-eyed with a choked moan as I feel him actually swallow my head.

No one’s ever been able to do that. Girls have tried, but with my size, they’ve never come close.

Now, I watch in pure bliss as Val’s lips slide *all* the way down, until they’re wrapped around the pulsing base, his nose against the neatly trimmed hair.

“*FUUUUCK*!” I roar, groaning, throwing my head back.

Val moans around me, sliding his mouth up, then down, then up, his tongue dancing over my head as I grip the duvet beneath me and writhe like a worm on a fisherman's hook.

His mouth slides back to my balls, sucking and slurping on one and then the other while he jerks me off until I’m shaking, my thighs clenched as I fight for air.

Then, he goes *lower*.

“*Oh shit…*”

He chuckles as the whimper tumbles from my mouth. His tongue slides past my balls, over the soft skin beneath them, and then—

My eyes fly open as the strangled cry bursts from my lips.

"*F-f-FUCK!!*"

Val's tongue teases over my asshole, and my world *implodes*. My eyes roll back in my head as his wet tongue pries me open, swirling around the rim of my ass as I go to fucking pieces.

Sounds I don't recognize come choking from my lips as he tongues my ass, sending shockwaves through my core that I've never once felt. His tongue swipes and swirls, then stiffens and pushes against the hole until I'm squirming and shaking, my legs opening wider even before he shoves them up and apart.

"Oh I *like* this..." he purrs into my balls. "No one's ever been here, have they?"

I can only whimper nonsense, shaking my head side to side.

"*None* of the girls you brought home time and time again ever made you squeal like this with their tongue in your asshole?"

"*Never*…" I blurt, gasping, trembling.

Needing.

"Well, that's rude of them," he growls. "And their loss. *But my fucking gain*."

His tongue slides into me again, and I cry out sharply, throwing my head back and rolling my hips against his mouth. He slides his tongue back out, and this time, it's his finger I feel push against my ring.

"Relax, wreckage," he growls against my thigh. "Relax, and let me in."

His finger slowly pushes inside, getting past the initial tightness and then sliding deeper. My eyes roll back at the utterly foreign and yet mind-blowing sensation of his finger snaking into my ass, until suddenly, they bulge wide.

“*FUUUUCK!*”

My entire body twitches and shudders when his finger strokes against a spot inside. Val groans, and when he does it again, my voice is just a croak.

“*More*!” I gasp. “Fuck, Val…”

“*There it is*,” he growls, stroking his finger in and out of my ass, teasing the pad of it over *that spot* again and again. My vision blurs, my body going limp on the bed. He takes my cock into his mouth again, sucking me deep as he pushes in again, adding pressure to that spot, and I swear I almost come.

He must feel it, because he slows, sliding his mouth off me and then making me whimper in protest when he withdraws his finger from my ass.

“Uh-uh, baby,” he growls. “You don’t get to come yet. Not until my cock is deep inside this tight little hole.”

He grabs a bottle of lube from the bedside table. I stare as he squirts it onto his hand, then drizzles more all over his swollen dick. My eyes widen, and I swallow nervously as I watch him stroke his cock with one hand, then slide the other between my legs. A whimper tumbles from my mouth as his slick finger rubs my hole and then slowly pushes inside.

“*Unngh*,” I groan, my eyes rolling back as Val’s finger slides in and out, slowly stroking himself. He pushes a second finger in alongside the first, and I gasp when I feel them sinking into me.

“*There we go*,” he groans in that sexy fucking growl. “Open up for me, wreckage. I need to get you all stretched out if you’re going to take my cock.”

I moan as I watch him slowly stroke his slick hand up and down his glistening, bulging cock.

“And you *are* going to take my cock, aren’t you, baby?”

All I can do is nod, my eyes wide as I lose myself in his icy blues.

Val slowly slides his fingers from my ass, and I shiver when he wraps them around my dick. He moves over me, his eyes capturing mine.

I feel his hips grind against mine, lifting them as my legs spread wider for him. Then I feel it, and my breath catches: his cock—slippery, thick, and hot as it glides between my cheeks and centers at the puckered hole between them.

"*Fuck*," Val groans. "*SO* fucking tight for me, Roman."

I moan, gasping for breath as I feel him start to push.

"*Say—fuck—say that again*..." I choke.

Val grunts, pushing a little more as I feel my ass starting to open for him.

"Say what, baby?"

"*My name*…" I moan, my eyes rolling back as his head begins to slip into me.

"How about you open up and take my cock like a good boy, *Roman*."

Sweet fucking FUCK.

Just as he says it, and my back arches, his head pops past my ring and slides into me. I gasp loudly, tensing up, but then force myself to breathe. He pushes again, adding pressure as another inch of his huge dick disappears up my ass.

"*Jesus*—"

"No, that's just me in your ass, baby," he murmurs as his muscles coil and flex. Another inch of his cock pushes into me, and my world begins to blur.

Slowly, I start to relax. And when I do, his big dick slides deeper into me. I feel the swollen head push over *that spot* inside, and I cry out, my cock lurching and twitching and pulsing violently as precum drips down my shaft.

Fucking hell, I've never been this hard before. Never been this turned on before. Never *wanted someone* like this before.

Val rolls his hips, pushing even deeper as he leans over me, lowering himself until my cock is trapped between his abs and mine, and his lips are

ghosting over my mouth. He groans as he rams forward, and when I feel his thighs pressing to my ass, I know he's all the way in.

I'm shaking, my cock twitching and pulsing like crazy, and he's not even touching it, or moving.

"Fuck, *Roman*," he growls against my lips.

I cry out when he slides his hand between us and wraps his fingers around my *steel*-hard cock.

"You know, for a straight boy, your dick *sure gets fucking hard* when you've got a huge cock all the way up your ass."

I almost laugh, but when he rolls his hips and his cock drags against that spot inside again, my jaw goes slack and I groan.

"*That's it*," he growls, nibbling on my lips. His hips roll back, sliding his cock slowly out until my ring is wrapped tight around his head. He plunges back in as his tongue dives into my mouth, and I cry out.

He starts to stroke my dick in time with his thick, slippery cock gliding in and out of my hole. I don't even realize I'm doing it until my arms are wrapped around his neck, and Val groans as he kisses me even harder.

"*Fuck*, baby," he chokes, his tongue dancing with mine as our breath mingles. "Yeah, *just* like that, little wreckage," he groans. "Milk me with your sweet ass. Milk my dick, baby, while I jerk this gorgeous cock of yours."

He thrusts into me hard, ramming against that spot again as I cry out, my back arching as I cling to his big shoulders. His muscled body coils and ripples as he thrusts into me, driving into my ass again and again as his slippery fingers tease up and down my swollen dick until it feels like I'm literally going to explode.

His thick cock slides deep, over and over, making my legs shake and my toes curl. My breathing turns ragged and rasping, my sweat-slicked chest rising and falling against his as he strokes me faster and fucks me harder.

“*Val*—!” I croak, reality spinning, shattering, and blurring at the edges. “I—*oh fuck, I’m—I’m—*”

“I want you to come at the same time as me, wreckage,” he groans, pumping into me fast and deep, his balls slapping my ass as precum drips freely down my cock. “Let me feel this big fucking gorgeous dick come all over my hand while your ass squeezes the cum from my balls. Right now, baby.”

I moan as he drops his mouth to mine, our foreheads pressed together as he sucks my lower lip between his teeth.

“*Come for me, Roman.*”

The orgasm hits like a fucking freight train. It starts somewhere deep inside me I didn’t know existed, then explodes out through my cock, my arms and legs, up my spine and from my hair, until I’m crushing my mouth to his and screaming into his lips as I start to *come*.

My cock jumps violently in his hand, and I cry out as the cum erupts in thick ropes from my swollen head. I’m writhing in pure ecstasy, Roman still fucking me as my cum splatters all over my abs and his hand.

“*Fuck, Roman…*”

Then I feel his cock swell even bigger inside me, pushing so fucking deep, starting to twitch and throb and pulse. Val’s cum floods into my ass, his mouth searing to mine as he jerks my cock over and over, slicking my cum up and down my shaft until we finally come to a shuddering stop.

Then his lips finds mine, and the entire fucking *world* disappears as I lose myself in them.

* * *

“WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?”

I look up as Val walks back into his bedroom—still naked—with two glasses of water and a bag of chips in his hands. I finish buttoning my pants and reach for my t-shirt, then pull it back on.

“I…”

He gives me a look, rolling his eyes. “Are you *leaving*?”

I lift a shoulder, and his grin drops.

“Seriously?”

I clear my throat and look down. “Yeah?”

“You could always stay,” he murmurs.

“I should go.”

I don’t look at him, but I can feel his scowl. I finish putting my shoes on, then my belt, before I run my fingers through my hair and turn to face him.

Still naked.

Still beautiful.

So hard to walk away from.

But…I have to.

The sex was one thing—not in an “external stimulus” way. In a what the *actual fuck* way. In a “redefining sex” way.

Because that was the best sex I’ve ever had, no question. I’m not sure I’m ready to explore yet what it means that it was me *getting* fucked. But, there it is.

No, I’m not leaving because of the sex.

I’m leaving because if I don’t now, I’m not sure I'll ever be able to. And that’s not what this is, or can be.

Sex is one thing. Staying means it’s more than sex.

And I don’t know if I can do that.

“I just…I have to get home for something.”

Val eyes me, his brow furrowed a little before he shrugs. “Okay. No big deal.”

I grit my teeth.

That was just a *very* big deal for me.

“So, yeah, I guess I’ll—”

“Roman.”

He smirks at me as he sets our snacks down on the bedside table and then walks over to me. I shiver as his naked body presses against me, his hand drifting up into the back of my hair.

“I’m not one of your identity crisis one night stand girls, okay? If you need to leave, that’s cool.”

I swallow. “Okay.”

“Great.”

“So…I’ll just leave—”

“Mmm, not quite yet.”

He grabs the back of my head and slams his mouth to mine, kissing me deep, his tongue exploring my mouth as I moan into his lips. The kiss drags on for who knows how long before he slowly pulls away, with me wishing he wouldn’t.

“*There*. *Now you can go*,” he growls.

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22

VAL

ROMAN LETS OUT A LONG, gasping moan as his cum sprays the tiled wall of the walk-in shower. His cock jerks in my hand, pulsing against my fingers as I stroke the cum from his balls.

I sink my teeth into his shoulder and groan as my dick erupts inside him, spilling my own cum deep inside his ass as he squeezes it tight around me.

"*Fuck*…" I groan, my fingers dragging down the tile on either side of his head before dropping my arms. My chest presses to his muscled back as my arms circle him, both of us shaking and panting.

"You fucking *kill me*…" I growl against his skin, biting his shoulder again, loving the way it makes him tremble and whimper.

This is the fifth—no, sixth—time I've fucked Roman in the last week and a half.

It's becoming a bit of a delicious routine.

He texts something totally innocent like "Checking if you have enough food in the fridge"…as if we don't live in a city where I could have literally any cuisine delivered to my door in fifteen minutes.

But when he does, I play along and say "I'm not sure. I might starve to death" or something equally dramatic.

An hour later, he shows up with a bag of groceries that so far have a pretty shitty track record of making it into the fridge before I've got his clothes off

and either his cock down my throat or mine reaming his ass.

Aside from rehearsal, I've never been big on "routine". But this?

This, I could get fucking used to.

The steam from the shower curls around us as I nibble on his shoulder, grinding against him, the last spurts of my cum emptying into him. Slowly, I ease my dick out, grinning at the way he pushes back, trying to keep me inside.

I groan, stepping under the spray of the hot water and shoving my hands through my hair, slicking it back. Roman ogles me in that way I fucking love but stays right where he is. I'd tell him there's plenty of room for both of us, but he's made it pretty damn clear the last three times I've dragged him to the shower with me that he'd rather wait than squeeze against me and rinse off together.

I mean, he hasn't *said* that in so many words, but I'm not blind.

Almost to test my theory, I shove my hair back again and suddenly close the distance between us. He tenses up as I grab his face and kiss him deeply, letting my tongue probe his mouth.

Roman's mouth shuts, forcing me out. I pull away, a slight frown pinching my brows which he obviously sees. I go to kiss him again. But this time, he actually puts his hand on my chest to stop me.

"Since when do you have a problem with kissing?" I mutter.

But I already know the answer: the sex part is over, and when it is, Roman becomes averse to *any* intimacy at all.

No cuddling. No touching. No closeness.

No kissing.

"I don't," he shrugs. "I'm just…waiting for you to finish so I can clean up."

"Be my guest," I say with a flourish, stepping aside and gesturing to the water sluicing down.

"Thanks," he grunts, slipping past me and ducking under the water.

“So, really. What’s your deal with kissing?”

He frowns as he glances back at me. “I don’t have a problem with kissing. We’ve been kissing for the last forty minutes.”

“So, you don’t have a problem with kissing when I'm fucking your sweet ass, is what you’re saying.”

Roman’s face turns as red as you’d think it would after me saying something like that. It’s seriously cute, even if I’m annoyed.

“Obviously not,” he mutters, rinsing the soap off his grooved, perfect body.

“And when I’m *not* fucking you?”

“Huh?” He shoots me a look. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Sure.

“You’re fine getting deepthroated and *fucked* by a man. But *kissing* one is way too gay for ultra-straight Roman—”

“C’mon—”

“Who comes like a firehose when he takes it up the ass—”

“The fuck is your problem?”

I shrug, letting it go—for now.

“Nothing.”

I’ve known guys like this before. Hell, I *was* that guy at one point. “Down low” or “straight buds”…guys who’ll fuck another guy, but then shy away from any sort of intimacy that comes after, as if *that’s* the “gay line” they can’t or won’t cross. The mental gymnastics required to tell yourself that fucking another guy or getting fucked yourself *isn’t* gay, but that snuggling with and kissing that guy after *is* are…well, a real thing, even if they’re fucking stupid.

I step out of the shower without another word, toweling off as Roman finishes up. When the water shuts off and the door swings open again, I test

another theory. I stand there waiting for him with a clean towel, the one I just used hanging on a hook next to the shower door.

Roman's face heats as his eyes drop to the clean, dry towel in my hands. Then he turns and pulls the other one off the hook and wraps it around his waist.

Jesus fuck.

"So, dinner will be here in twenty," I shrug. "Why don't you grab a pair of my sweats and make yourself comfy on the couch."

The predictable panicked look that spreads over his features is almost funny.

Almost.

"Relax," I smile. "I'm just fucking with you. I know you'd never stay for a meal, or, God forbid, *sleep over*."

Roman scowls at me as he dries off. "I just—"

Can't bring yourself to spend the night with a guy even if you just moaned like a porn star while you bent over and begged him to fuck your ass. Got it.

"No stress," I say tightly as I turn and leave the bathroom.

In my room, I'm pulling on baggy sweats and a t-shirt when I hear Roman step into the room behind me.

"It's not that I don't *want* to stay," he says quietly. "I just…"

I turn as he's lifting his shoulders.

"It's complicated."

"Yeah, closets can be like that."

He glares at me. "C'mon. I just…" he shrugs. "I mean, I'm not…"

Yeah, hit me with that "I'm not gay" line again, fucker. It's a tough sell when you've been over here begging for my cock almost every night.

No. If I say that out loud, it'll push him past the breaking point of whatever thread is keeping him close to me, and to *this*…whatever "this" is.

Roman starts making the rounds of my room, picking up the various articles of his clothing that were tossed earlier. He pulls on jeans and a hoodie, scrupulously avoiding my gaze.

"So," I drawl, opening the window and leaning against the sill as I stick a cigarette in my mouth. I flick my lighter, which draws his attention. His brow furrows as he looks at the cigarette.

"Same time tomorrow? You can skip the groceries excuse. You've already brought me five gallons of milk." I drag on the cigarette as I look up at him. "I'm lactose intolerant, by the way."

Roman's brows knit as he stares at my smoke. "You should really quit."

"I'll take that under advisement. Is that a yes for tomorrow?"

He looks away. "I—I don't know."

"Guess we'll just have to see how horny for my cock you are tomorrow, then."

Roman's eyes snap to mine, blazing. "Is there a reason you're being a dickhead?"

"Just trying to plan my schedule," I say dryly. "It'd be nice to know if the closet door is open or shut ahead of time."

His mouth tightens. "Val, I'm…" He takes a slow breath. "I'm—"

"Drowning in your toxic views of what it means to *be a man*?" I say coldly. "Yeah—I know."

His eyes darken. "I don't *have* to come here, you know," he growls.

"I don't get the impression that anyone's twisting your arm," I snap back.

Roman scowls, his jaw tightening in that sexy, broody way that always makes my pulse surge.

"I should go."

I follow him out of my bedroom into the main living area. My hand wraps around his arm, pulling him around to face me.

“Roman, I’m…” I exhale. “Look, I get it, okay? I’ve been there. I understand the confusion, the conflict of identity against societal bullshit. If you ever want to talk…” I grin. “And I really do mean *just talk*, as much self-restraint as that would take, I’m here—”

“I’m good.” He smiles, like everything’s fine. Like he’s *not* drowning in a murky pool of confusion.

“Well…” I shrug. “Offer stands.”

“Got it.” He nods his chin and then walks to the door. He pauses as he starts to open it, turning back to look at me. His eyes spark, and his mouth opens a little before it shuts again. “So…uh… Maybe I’ll see you tomorrow?”

I sigh, chuckling to myself and shaking my head. “Guess we’ll see.”

“I’ll bring groceries or anything else you might need. Just let me know.”

“No milk,” I say wryly.

He nods. “Got it. Okay…”

Our eyes lock as the seconds tick by in silence.

“Okay…bye.”

He steps out quickly and shuts the door behind him.

This fucking guy.

* * *

“COME ON IN.”

There are perks to being “The Marquis”, AKA the head of the Obsidian Syndicate. The big one, along with “obscene power”, is, of course, *money*.

Lots of money.

In addition to the sprawling mountain “camp” up in the Adirondacks, my brother also has an apartment in Paris, another in Rome, and an insane all-glass penthouse here in New York…for while he’s having his five-story mansion on Central Park renovated.

It’s fucking *good* to be the king, apparently.

Vaughn’s shirtless, his sweatpants sitting low on his hips as he steps aside to usher me into the penthouse. He looks groggy, but that makes sense given that it’s two in the morning and I just called and woke him up fifteen minutes ago.

His brows furrow as he closes the door and looks at me. “You okay?”

I shrug.

“How bad?”

I’ve told him before about the nightmares I get, though that's putting it mildly.

The glimpses of memories that come clawing for me in the middle of the night are goddamn *terrors*.

“Not…great,” I grunt quietly.

My eyes turn to scan his huge, opulent penthouse, and my brows arch when my gaze lands on the lacy black bra flung over the back of the sofa.

“Fuck, man.” I wince, shaking my head. “Didn’t realize you had company. You know what, we’ll talk tomorrow. I’ll—”

He shrugs. “It’s fine. Come on. Let’s step outside.”

I follow him through the gorgeous space and out onto his veranda. Just like inside, the exterior is *ridiculous*, with huge Japanese maple trees in large earthen pots everywhere, giving the illusion of being in the woods even though we’re high above the streets of New York.

We sink into deep chairs around a stone pit. Vaughn touches a button on the side of his, and a gas fire flickers to life.

“Jesus,” I grin. “Got a little robot that comes out and serves cocktails, too?”

My brother smiles a rare smile at me. “Working on it. And yes, you may.”

I cock a brow at him as I finger the pack of cigarettes in my pocket.

“Smoke,” Vaughn clarifies. “You were about to ask me if you could.”

“Okay, you *might* be leaning into the Bond villain vibe too much,” I mutter, pulling out the pack, slipping one between my lips, and lighting it. Smoke curls around my face as I lean back in the chair and gaze up at the sky through the trees.

“I’m glad you called, Val.”

“I’m glad you answered. Sorry again if I’m interrupting a sleepover—”

“You’re not interrupting *anything*. Tell me about your dream tonight.”

I shake my head. “Nothing concrete stays after I wake up. It’s just…a general feeling of doom and terror.”

“Have you tried sleeping pills—”

“I don’t want meds.” I shake my head. “And… I dunno. When I have them—the nightmares—even if I can’t remember them, I *know* they’re about before.”

He knows what I mean.

“Before”, as in “before my memory loss”.

“In a way…” I shake my head. “I guess it brings a little comfort, knowing that at least some part of my fucked-up brain remembers that time.” I look over to him. “Home. Mom and Dad. You and me, two brothers.”

“We’re still brothers,” he says quietly.

I smile wryly. “I know.” I take a slow drag on my smoke. “Would you please tell me something about Mom and Dad?”

“You’re looking for *more* nightmares?”

I chuckle. “Something good.”

“I don’t know if there is anything good,” he grunts. “Seriously.”

“Nothing?”

Vaughn looks away, dragging his hand over his chin, thinking.

“This one Christmas—you were four, I think—Dad brought home this *sick* car-racing thing, like a Hot Wheels set. It had this little battery-powered wheel that would fling the cars down the track, around a bend, through a loop, and then all the way back to the start where the wheel would send them flying again.” He smiles to himself. “That was a *good* Christmas morning, even if the house was cold and we were probably hungry.”

I grin. “Sounds fun.”

“It was. I mean, obviously he stole it, but it was fun—at least while it lasted.”

I snort. “What’d he do, sell it for drugs?”

Vaughn shakes his head. “No, though I’m sure he was planning to. He went out that night to get fucked up. Mom had one of her guys over, and they got into an argument over prices. He went storming out of Mom and Dad’s room, and he kicked that racetrack as hard as he could on the way past.” His mouth twists. “Shattered the battery wheel and snapped the track in half. And that was that.”

We sit in silence, looking into the crackling fire as I slowly smoke my cigarette.

“We never could catch a break, huh?”

He shakes his head. “Nope.”

“Let me ask you something.” I turn to him. “This thing between you and the Nikitin family—”

“I already told you,” he says. “I didn’t have anything to do with the bombing.”

“That’s not what I mean. I just mean the general rivalry to get close with that Cosimo guy.”

“*That Cosimo guy* controls the purse strings to one of the oldest, most powerful underworld institutions in history,” Vaughn says stiffly.

“No, I get that—”

“So, what’s the question?”

“Is any of it about Dasha Lukashova? You were originally the one marrying—”

Vaughn chuckles quietly. “Are you asking if I’m driven by some jilted lover bullshit?” He smiles. “*No*. I had about as much interest in marrying Dasha as I gather she had in marrying me. Did I want that connection to Cosimo Sangrini? Of course. But as far as I’m concerned, Roman Nikitin can have her.” His lips pull into a wry smile. “Though something tells me she’s not exactly his *type*…”

My jaw tightens. “Meaning?”

Vaughn shrugs. “Meaning Roman’s been keeping secrets from his father. One day, those secrets might be a way to—”

“Don’t fucking do that.”

The words shoot from my mouth like a bullet.

“Don’t.” I shake my head. “Leverage is everything, especially in your world, I get that. But not this.”

Vaughn arches a brow as he glances at me. “So, you’ve seen it, too?”

“What I’ve seen, regardless of what Roman is or isn’t,” I growl, ”is the way the world looks through the pain and self-loathing of knowing you’re *different*.” I exhale slowly. “Remember when we had that talk? When we first reconnected, and I was trying to wrap my head around you being the head of a big shadowy criminal empire?”

He nods.

“What’d I ask you?”

Vaughn draws in a breath. “You asked me what my line was when it came to the Syndicate. What’s the one thing I wouldn’t do.”

“And what was your answer?” I press.

“Children. I told you I wouldn’t ever go after or harm children, even to get what I needed from their parents.”

“Exactly,” I say. “And this *thing* you might have on Roman?” I shake my head. “That's in the same category. You can’t use that against someone. It’s not a secret mistress or a gambling debt. It's part of their identity. You can't hold that hostage.”

Vaughn looks at me curiously. “Can’t I?”

“I won’t let you.”

His eye drag over my face, as if he’s trying to peer into my mind. When I give him nothing, he draws in a slow breath through his nose and finally nods.

“Fine,” he murmurs. “I won’t.”

“Thank you.”

“Can I ask why you’re so concerned with Roman Nikitin and his sense of identity?”

My face stays totally impassive as I shrug. “I’ve been there. I know what it feels like to hate yourself simply for what you are. It wouldn’t be leverage, Vaughn. It would be abject cruelty.”

He nods slowly. “All right.”

I finish my cigarette and toss it in the fire before standing. “I’ll let you get back to your sleepover.”

He smirks as he stands as well, dropping a hand on my shoulder. “I’m glad you came by. Truly.”

“Me too.”

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23

ROMAN

ME

I'm outside. You ready?

EVELINA

Best. Brother. EVAAAHH!!! :D

EVELINA

1 sec

I'M PARKED in front of the Mercury Theater, after getting Evie's text earlier asking for a ride home from rehearsal. She's got a rotating roster of drivers—I think it's Mikhail this week—but I know she gets annoyed always having one of our father's swarthy, monosyllabic guards hanging around.

I kill time on my phone as I wait, and inevitably find myself on Instagram. Also inevitably, I find myself tapping on Val's profile.

I've been doing that a lot lately.

My face heats, my lip sucking between my teeth as I look at a new post.

Fuck.

He's lying in a bed I know all too well by now, shirtless, a mug of coffee in his hand as he smirks at the camera in that fucking obscenely sexy way. The caption reads "Rise and shine, carpe fucking diem!!!"

My eyes instantly drop to the comments. Christ, it's a fucking thirst parade. Half of them point out that he's alone in bed and offer up various semi-creative ways to help him fix that. The rest are ridiculously over-the-top hungry comments about his body.

For a second, a furious feeling that I hate to admit might be jealousy roars through me. Then, it's replaced by something else.

Smugness.

Hell yeah that bed is empty aside from him…because *I* kept him up in it until midnight last night, before I left.

Thirst on that, motherfuckers.

My phone dings with a new text from Evie.

EVELINA

sorry! Madame K. wants to talk to me about something!!!

It's followed by a string of gleeful excited face emojis. I grin.

ME

No problem! Do your thang.

I've heard that Madame Kuzmina is a *tyrant* when she wants to be. But I also know that when she wants to behead someone, she does so publicly. Her singling Evie out for a chat after rehearsal actually sounds like a good thing.

EVELINA

Want to come in? I don't know how long I'll be. Or if you have to go, don't worry!!

ME

Nah, my day is clear. I'll come inside. No rush.

The Mercury Theater is a *stunning* old theater in midtown, at Madison Avenue and East 49th Street. I've been here dozens of times to see Evie perform or pick her up after rehearsal, but I'm blown away by the beauty of the place every time.

Today, it appears the company has been rehearsing on stage rather than in the practice studio. Some dancers are still going through movements in various clusters around the stage, with others sitting to the side, cooling down.

“Roman! What up, dude?”

I turn, grinning when I see Miguel walking over. I bump his fist with mine.

“What up, man?”

“Not much. You here to pick up Evie?”

I nod.

“Cool.” Miguel turns and points up past the top balcony, to the small window that I know is Madame Kuzmina’s office. “She’s up in the dragon’s lair.”

I chuckle. “How was today?”

He groans. “Brutal, man. Kuzmina was in a *mood*. But we had a visitor.” He grins and winks. “If Angela asks, I never said it, but *damn*, the girl is *fine*. Russian.” He turns and points.

My jaw goes tight.

“Daria, I think her name is?”

“Dasha,” I growl, my eyes narrowing to where she’s standing at the side of the stage, grinning with sparkles in her eyes, utterly *charmed* by the hot, shirtless motherfucker with all his tattoos and muscles on display, talking to her like he’s ready to fuck her right there against the curtain.

Val.

“Her name is Dasha,” I say coldly. “Dasha Lukashova.”

Miguel’s brows pinch, and then suddenly his face pales and his eyes go wide.

“Oh *fuck*…” He looks terrified as he steps away from me. “Shit, dude, I didn’t make the connection. Roman, no disrespect at all, I didn’t mean to

say shit like that about your fiancée—”

“All good.” I force a smile as I turn and clap him on the back. “Seriously.”

He smiles weakly. “Beautiful girl you’ve got, man. You’re a lucky guy.”

“Thanks, bud.”

He heads back to the stage, but I just stay in the aisle, glaring at Val as he shamelessly flirts with Dasha.

Suddenly he turns, and his eyes land on me. My vision tunnels as I watch him deliberately drape a thick arm around Dasha’s shoulders.

Then he *grins* at me.

“Roman!” he calls, beckoning.

Dasha turns, her brows arching in surprise when she sees me. “Hi?” she says, frowning as I stalk toward them.

I climb the stairs at the left of the stage and approach, my eyes firmly on *him*.

“Hi,” I mutter, finally turning to Dasha. “I'm here to pick up my sister.”

Dasha beams. “You should have been here ten minutes ago. She is *fantastic*.”

“Taught her everything she knows,” Val sighs deeply, making Dasha giggle.

“Romance—” He stops and turns to Dasha. “Have you heard that nickname people have for this guy? Romance?”

My fiancée laughs, turning to look at me. “Can’t say I know that one.”

“Because of what a romantic charmer he is,” Val grins. “A real *lover*, this one.”

I turn to level a cold, brittle smile at him. He just beams back.

“Romance, did you know that your girl is a *huge* ballet fan?”

“*I’ve heard*,” I say through grit teeth as my venomous gaze drags back to him.

“Roman!”

Evie comes skipping down the aisle, already out of her dance gear, a huge grin on her face. I give her a big hug as she slams into me.

“How was…?”

She pulls away, beaming. “*Great*. Tell you later.”

She turns to Dasha. “I’m so glad you came by today! Sorry for our artistic director. She’s…”

“Russian?” Dasha says with a light laugh.

“*Very*,” Evie giggles.

“Hey, if you’re not busy right now…” Dasha shrugs. “Can I buy you a drink or something? To say thanks for inviting me to rehearsal today?”

My sister looks like she’s on cloud nine. “Yeah! I’d love to—” Then she winces as turns to me. “I…”

“Go. Have fun,” I smile.

“You came all the way here…”

“Which wasn’t a big deal at all.”

Dasha glances at me. “Sure you don’t mind if I steal her?”

“Please do.”

She smiles at me. “Okay, thanks.” She turns, and I watch with poison in my eyes as she throws her arms around Val and gives him a big hug. “And thank *you* so much for being my tour guide today!”

Val looks right at me as he wraps his arms around her. “My *pleasure*.”

My temple throbs.

Dasha and my sister take off, then I’m standing there alone with the fucker.

“I have a confession.”

I'm still seething as I turn to him. “What.”

Then I’m gasping in surprise as he steps right into my personal space. I step away again and then jolt when I feel empty air beneath my foot. I've almost backed clean off the stage. Val’s hand shoots out, grabbing my shirt and yanking me upright.

“*Thanks*,” I mumble, turning scarlet.

“Someone’s gotta watch out for you, wreckage.”

I blush even more as I look away. “What was your confession,” I grunt.

“Green looks *good* on you.”

My eyes snap to his. “Excuse me?”

He grins. “I think Dasha’s got a little crush on me.”

I roll my eyes. “Is that supposed to make me jealous of her?”

Val cocks a brow, his head tilting to the side. “One would *think*—you being so straight and her being your fiancée—that it would make you jealous of *me*, no?”

Shit.

He grins a shit-eating grin. “Little Freudian slip there, Romance?”

“I don’t even know what we’re talking about,” I grunt. “But I’m not jealous.”

“Of course not.”

I glare at him. “I’m *not*.”

He winks. “Yes. That’s what I just said.”

My brow wrinkles. “Are you always this annoying?”

“Only with people I really like.”

My cheeks tingle, and I bite my lip to stop from grinning like an idiot as I turn away. “Well…bye.”

His hand closes around my bicep, squeezing just enough to send a tingle through me.

“Hey—you still offering rides home?”

* * *

“WELL, THANKS FOR…*WALKING ME UP*?”

I’ve been utterly silent the entire drive to Val’s place. *He* hasn’t, but I have.

He gives me a half-perplexed, half-amused glance as he unlocks the loft door.

“Super chivalrous, wreckage, but I think I’m good now—Roman?”

I shoulder past him, storming into his apartment like wrath incarnate.

I don’t even know why I’m so angry. Why I’ve been livid since I walked into the Mercury and saw him all cozy with Dasha, with his fucking *arm* around her.

The thirsty comments on his Instagram earlier were the dry wood and straw. But seeing *that*, and the way he grinned at her like pure sex, was the spark that ignited the whole thing.

Val follows me inside and shuts the door.

“Look, as fun as it is to hang out with a silent person, I think I’ve hit my limit on one-sided conversation for the day—”

He grunts when I whirl and slam into him, shoving him against the door.

“What the *fuck* is your pr—”

“*You*,” I snarl, grabbing him by the collar. “*You’re* my fucking problem!”

He barks a cold laugh. “Oh, *I’m* the problem.” He smirks. “*Me*.”

“Let’s get one thing fucking straight,” I hiss.

Val laughs. “*Perfect* choice of word.”

My teeth grind. “Fuck you. And I am *not* fucking jealous. Why the *fuck* would I be jealous—”

“Because I was trying to *make* you jealous!” he roars in my face. “I could see the green venom dripping out of your pores from a mile away, motherfucker. So why don’t we stop pretending!”

I’m shaking as I drag in a heavy breath of air, my pulse like liquid fire.

“*Why*,” I growl, my throat squeezing in on itself, my pulse roaring in my ears.

The fucking nearness of him overwhelms me. The heat of his skin, his cedar, leather, and sage scent swirling through my senses.

All the feelings he brings out in me…

“*Why* were you trying to make me jealous,” I hiss.

The icy blue in Val's eyes glints like cold diamonds.

“Maybe I wanted to see if you really were too scared to *do* anything. To make a fucking move! Because, news flash, sneaking over here at night under the banner of bringing me fucking *groceries* isn’t making a fucking move, Roman. That’s just you being too afraid to—”

“*Afraid*?”

“Yeah, *afraid*—”

Val’s brows shoot up when I drop to my knees in front of him, pure need exploding through my veins as I yank on his belt.

“Roman—”

“Shut the fuck up. I'll show you afraid.”

Val groans as I tear his jeans open, shoving them down his hips. My eyes land on the heavy, rapidly swelling bulge tenting the front of his briefs

before I slide my hands into the elastic waistband and yank them down.

A soft, eager, fucking whimper that I don’t have any control over hums through my throat as reach for him, wrapping one hand around his thick, gorgeous cock and pumping it with my fist.

Val has a shocked expression on his face as I look up at him, dragging my nails over his abs and leaning in to let my breath tease over his head.

My tongue slips out, and when I swirl it over his swollen crown, I moan at the sweet taste of his precum that immediately leaks from the slit. Val tenses, his abs clenching as he grunts in pleasure. My own dick thickens to steel in my pants as I stroke him, looking up into his eyes as I keep teasing my tongue across the head.

“Shit, wreckage,” he groans deeply. I shiver as his hands drop and his fingers shove through my hair.

“You were saying?” I murmur, kissing the underside of his head.

“I wasn’t saying *shit*,” he growls. “Now put my fucking cock in your mouth.”

The power that explodes through me—the heady realization of the control I have over him, just with my mouth—is like a drug.

Fuck. Is this what women feel, in the same position? That they're taking complete control of their partner's dominant male energy?

“*Your mouth*,” Val groans, his body clenching. “Fucking take me in your mouth, wreckage.”

I just tease my tongue around the head.

“Were you trying to fuck her?”

His face crumples as I dance the tip of my tongue over the slit at the head of his dick, tasing more of his sticky precum.

“*Who*?” he hisses.

“*Dasha*,” I growl.

“She’s *your* fiancée, motherfucker,” he chokes.

“I think we’ve established my lack of interest in her.”

My tongue swirls around the ridge of his crown as his jaw goes slack and his hands tighten in my hair.

“*Curious*,” Val grits through his teeth.

“And what exactly is so *curious*,” I murmur, nibbling down the side of his cock with my lips.

“She’s a beautiful girl, and you’re *not interested* at all, are you?”

“I—”

“For a guy who wants to slap any label he can on himself *except* gay—”

“Don’t make this about me,” I hiss, making him flinch as I rake my teeth gently down the underside of his cock. “*You* were the one eye-fucking her. But then, I suppose we both know how *un*-picky you are.”

Val tenses. “What’d you say?”

“I said you’re not exactly *picky* about who you fuck,” I growl, tonguing his dick.

Suddenly, he’s grabbing me by the collar and yanking me up off the ground. “What—because I’m bi, I automatically want to fuck Dasha?”

“I thought you wanted to fuck *everyone*,” I growl back. “Forgive me if I somehow read you drooling over Dasha as anything but—”

He suddenly whirls me around and slams me up against the door, looming close. When he wraps a hand around my throat, my cock *aches* as it leaks precum into my briefs.

“Being bi doesn’t mean I’m a fucking whore, *motherfucker*,” he hisses through clenched teeth. “It means my attraction to people isn’t dictated by their genitals.”

I flinch, all my bold energy suddenly winking out like a flame in the wind.

“I—sorry,” I mumble. “I didn’t mean—”

My words are smothered when Val brands his mouth to mine, kissing me like it’s a punishment, bruising my lips with his. I moan when his tongue surges into my mouth, swirling and dancing as his hands grab my belt and yank it open. I gasp as he shoves my pants down my hips a little, reaching inside and wrapping his hand around my cock. He squeezes tightly, and I groan as he pulls it free and rubs my head against his erection.

Val leans into me, brushing my jawline with his lips until his mouth hums against my ear, sending shivers down my spine.

“The thing is, baby,” he murmurs. “I *am* kind of a whore…”

I tense instantly, raw, snarling fury sparking inside me and coiling in my chest.

I gasp when Val squeezes my cock.

“That make you jealous, wreckage?” he purrs as he starts to stroke it.

I swallow heavily, my legs trembling as he fists my erection.

“*No*.”

“Liar,” Val chuckles darkly against my neck, his hand stroking me with teasing, soft movements that have my toes curling. I reach for him again, shaking as I wrap my hand around his big cock and start to jerk him off.

“I am *not* jeal—”

“So you don’t mind thinking about all the *fun* I've had with girls?” he murmurs into my ear. “Or with *boys*…?”

I snap. The image of him with women pisses me off enough. Thinking about him with another man—*any* other fucking man—makes me see goddamn red.

A vicious growl claws its way out of my chest, and Val *groans* as he fastens his teeth to my neck, sucking on my skin as if to swallow the sound whole.

“*Yes*,” he groans, pumping my dick faster. “Get mad, wreckage. Get fucking *jealous*, baby.”

“*Fuck you—*”

“I fucking *like* you jealous,” he grunts.

I groan, grinding my hips against his, my cock swelling as he strokes it. My own fist pumps up and down on his dick, spreading the sticky precum over his head with my thumb.

“*Why*,” I gasp.

“Because then you get a taste of how *I* feel, knowing you’re engaged to that girl,” he snarls.

“You know I’m not really—”

“*You are*,” Val hisses into my neck, biting me even harder, making my pulse jump and my dick twitch in his fist.

“You come over here, and I want you all to my fucking *self*, and then you fuck off back to your Bratva world and your arranged Bratva marriage to Dasha, and it makes me want to *split her pretty fucking head open*.”

He jerks me off faster and harder, sucking and biting my neck as I squirm.

“So *yes*, Roman, I want you jealous. Because that’s how I feel *every fucking day*. And you need to remember something,” he growls savagely into my skin. He suddenly spins us around and shoves me down onto all fours as he yanks my pants and boxers down to mid-thigh.

Oh fuck…

“When I told you that you were mine?”

He crouches behind me, spits on my asshole, then rubs the fat, swollen head of his cock against it.

“I meant, *you’re fucking MINE*.”

His palm shoves down between my shoulders, pushing my cheek to the floor, my ass in the air. Val grunts as he works his thick head past my ring, and I cry out, moaning and gasping as he sinks the first thick inch into me.

“Now…open that fucking ass for me like a good boy,” he snarls, wrapping his hand around the nape of my neck and making me moan when he crams another inch into me, “and let me *fuck what’s mine*.”

His cock rams into me so hard it knocks the wind from my lungs and rips a cry of pleasure from my throat. Val grinds deep, burying every inch of his thickness in me to the hilt and stretching me to my very limit. He eases his cock out, his head dragging deliciously over that spot inside before he rams right back in.

His free hand snakes between my legs, his strong, tattooed fingers teasing over my balls before he wraps them around my dick and squeezes tight.

“*Break for me, wreckage*.”

The sounds that claw and scrape their way out of my chest and throat are sounds I’ve never made before. The world blurs, my breath choking out against the floor, my face crumpled in ecstasy as Val fucks me *hard*. His balls slap against mine, his thick head dragging back and forth against that spot inside as he strokes my twitching cock with smooth, even strokes.

“Such a fucking greedy little slut for my cock, baby,” he groans, pounding into me as I melt. “Such a good boy, taking that fat dick like you were made for it. Is that it, wreckage? Were you *made* for my fucking cock?”

I moan gibberish into the floor, my balls pulling up and my dick jumping in his grip.

“*I.*”

I cry out as he rams into me.

“*Can’t.*”

Again.

“*Fucking*.”

His huge dick pounds deep, making my toes curl as I writhe in sweet delicious agony, my face pressed to the floor.

“*Hear y—*”

“YES!” I scream as I go hurtling over the edge. “*I was made for your fucking cock—FUCK!!*”

Wordless moans and gurgled cries tumble from my mouth as I start to come. Val groans, fucking into me harder and faster, stroking my cock as I spray my cum across the floor in hot, sticky ropes.

He just keeps fucking me. His dick *keeps hitting* that spot inside.

And I’m still fucking hard.

“*FUCK*!” Val roars, grabbing my hip in one hand and pumping my still-erect dick with the other. “I fucking *love* your cock, baby. I love how fucking big and hard you get for me. I love that I can make you come and then just keep on fucking you until you make another mess for me, wreckage.”

I cry out, that spot inside spasming like he’s fucking me with an electric prod, his gorgeous cock reaming my ass over and over.

“That what you’re gonna do, wreckage?” he hisses, leaning over and biting me sharply on the side of my neck. “*You gonna make another fucking cummy mess for me*?”

My eyes roll back. Reality itself breaks in two as his cock drives into me.

“*Come with me, Roman. Come with me.*”

It’s hearing him groan as he buries himself deep in my ass that pushes me over the edge. It’s that powerful feeling I had before, knowing it’s *me* who’s bringing him to this place, making him twitch and groan, his cock swelling and pulsing as I feel his hot cum shoot into me.

That’s what makes me shatter.

I cry out, choking into the floor and reaching back to grab his hand on my hip. My cock spasms in his grasp, my balls tightening again as my cum explodes from my cock to spray all over my thighs, the floor, my stomach…everywhere.

“*Mine*,” he groans, leaning over me, kissing and biting and nibbling my neck. “Don’t ever fucking forget it.”

* * *

I'm aware of his eyes on me as I pull some clothes back on—his, this time. Given that we never actually undressed earlier, mine are covered in a mix of floor scuff, sweat, and cum. So Val gave me a pair of sweats and a hoodie after showering.

I can feel him watching me, the unspoken question hanging in the air.

"Don't worry," he murmurs. "I'm not going to set us up for failure by even asking."

I smile privately, though I turn a little to let him see it.

"I—"

"March to the beat of your own drummer," he says with a lazy, outrageously sexy smirk. "So I've learned."

My smile widens. And before he can say another word, I walk over, cup his face, and kiss him deeply. Val kisses me back, his groans and mine mingling before we finally pull apart.

He walks me to the door of his apartment and opens it. Then he suddenly sticks an arm out, blocking my path.

"Fuck it." He sighs, grinning a little as he looks into my eyes. "Would you just fucking *stay*, dickhead?"

I grin, but shake my head. "I…"

"I know, I know." He shrugs. "Getting fucked on all fours on my living room floor is fine. But sleeping over would be too gay."

I frown, shaking my head.

"Honestly?" I give him a look. "It's her," I mutter. "Dasha."

Val frowns, puzzled. "Yeah, you're going to have to explain that to me."

"It's dumb, but…" I exhale. "My dad was a real prick when we were younger."

“*Was*?”

I chuckle. “Okay, he still *is*. But when our mom was still alive, he was… I mean, he cheated on her left and right, fucked anything with a pulse. And she knew it.”

Val frowns. “Do you think of what we’re doing as you cheating on Dasha? Because that’s a fucking *stretch*—”

“No, it's not that,” I say, shaking my head. “Like I said, Mom knew that he was out there fucking around all the time. But I think the only times it made her sad were the ones when he didn’t come home at night. Like, if he stayed over with whatever girl of the week he was with at the time.”

Val’s brow cocks, and his lips twist into a small grin. “I see…”

I smile wryly. “Welcome to my fucked-up head.”

“Hmm…” he murmurs, pulling me close. “I like it in your fucked-up head.” He kisses me softly, and I cup his face as I kiss him back. “Brutal honesty?” He sighs. “I think your take on this is fucking ridiculous.”

I scowl, and he grins.

“But I *respect it*.”

I smile weakly. “Thank you.”

“No problem. But sooner or later, little wreckage,” he murmurs, kissing the side of my neck. His teeth sink into me, making me gasp.

“…I *will* keep you here overnight. Even if I have to tie you to the bed.”

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VAL

I CAN'T SAY no to ultimatums, and I can't back down. Someone probably should have warned Roman about that.

I think it's a byproduct of growing up in foster homes. If some kid laughed because you couldn't shoot a three-pointer at the park? You went home and fucking practiced that shit until your fingers bled. Someone said that house on the corner was haunted? You damn well went inside.

Because in the foster system, that attitude is what separated the strong from the weak. It's what got you passed over by the predators, because they're looking for something fragile and pathetic, and if you make sure you're not either of those, you live to see another day, untouched.

The problem is, no one *has* warned Roman about my thing with ultimatums.

So today is about to be *very* fun.

Today, I have a surprise for him. For *us*, really.

He might not like what I'm about to do. Actually, I'm pretty sure in the short term, he's going to want to kill me. But long term?

He'll be thanking me. On his knees. Like he's going to be, in a minute.

I fucking *love* that glint he gets in his eye when he's about to wrap his mouth around my dick. There's clearly this battle of wills or morals going

on inside him, even though we both know the horny side is going to win out.

Again, this is one of the things I get so hard over when it comes to him: the fact that he's usually this ultra-growly bratva tough guy with tattooed knuckles, a savage glint in his eyes, and an love of blood and violence. But when he's with me, he drops to his knees and moans like an eager little slut around my cock.

It's knowing I can tame that beast in him that makes me so fucking into him.

Roman reaches down and peels off his t-shirt, tossing it away as my eyes hungrily roam his torso. Fucking hell, this is also what I love about him: the ultra-masculine look, the ink, the muscles, the whole "man's man" vibe he gives off.

I've never been a huge fan of super femme dudes, which I realize makes little sense considering that I also fuck women. Maybe I just view genders differently. With girls, yeah, I want soft, petite, smooth, feminine vibes. But guys? I want them to be *men*. Not a total "bear" or anything—super hairy with a big belly and thick arms, like all the twinks with daddy issues gravitate to. That's not Roman at all, anyway.

He's got this "hot guy mowing the lawn next door" kind of look. Like an all-American college quarterback who bought a motorcycle and got a bunch of tattoos after graduating.

Fuck, I don't even know what I'm saying. It doesn't matter. The second Roman's knees hit the floor in front of me and he reaches for my belt to pull it open, my mind always goes *blank*.

I groan as I sink back into the couch, watching Roman eagerly yank my jeans down my hips. My cock springs free from my boxers, and I hiss in pleasure as Roman fists it, slowly pumping up and down before lowering his mouth.

Fuck…

For a moment, I'm so lost in the pleasure of his lips wrapping around my dick and his tongue teasing the slit at the tip that forget to glance at my

watch. But when I do, groaning as Roman sucks me deeper, a grin pulls at my mouth.

If she's punctual, things are about to get—

"Hiii! Just me!"

Fun.

"Oh my God, I *love* this place—*oh*!"

Two things happen simultaneously. The first is that Dasha Lukashova almost stumbles backward as she steps into my loft through the unlocked door—exactly as I told her to—and sees her fiancé on his knees with my cock down his throat.

The second is that Roman almost has a fucking heart attack, scrambling to his feet and then literally falling onto the couch next to me, his eyes wide with horror as his face drains of all color.

"I—"

"This—"

"Not—"

Random words just…*dribble* from his mouth as he stares in abject terror at Dasha—who, to her credit, isn't losing her shit or screaming or anything.

Honestly? I knew she wouldn't, which is why I played it this way. Yes, I could have easily sat her down and explained everything. But the shock value here is important. It lets her know when I get to the next part that I'm crazy enough not to ignore.

"*Dasha*—" Roman blurts. "I—this isn't—"

"No, it's pretty much *exactly* what she thinks, isn't it?" I've got a smug, shit-eating grin on my face as I tuck my dick back into my pants and stand. "Dasha, *babe*, please have a seat."

I smile as I gesture to the chair across from me, facing the couch.

"You *son of a bitch*—"

“Let’s drop the bullshit, all of us, okay?” I turn to smile at her. “Dasha, the reason you just walked in on what you did—”

“You *told me* to come over right now!” she shrieks. “You said your door would be unlocked—”

“Which it was.”

“—and we were going to have coffee somewhere!” she says shrilly.

Hmm, yes. That *is* what I told her.

“Have a seat, gorgeous,” I smile at her. “Please.”

She huffs and angrily sits in the chair, still shooting daggers at Roman.

“First of all,” I say pleasantly, “stop glaring at him like that.”

Roman’s face swivels to mine, pale as a sheet, his wide eyes screaming “are you fucking insane”.

Maybe. Possibly.

Probably.

Dasha shoots me a cold look. “Do you know what would happen if I told anyone about what I just walked in—”

“Oh, I think we *all* know what would happen,” I growl. “Which is why I know you won’t.”

She stares at me. “His father would fucking—”

“True,” I shrug. “But it’s not him you're really worried about, is it?”

Her mouth purses.

Yeah, she’s already figured it out. I don’t know the Bratva world *that* well, but I know how hyper-hetero it is. Which means, yeah, bad for Roman if Dasha were to go tattling to Pavel. But it would be bad *for her*, too.

A previous engagement to a gay man? In that world? *Yeah*, she can go ahead and consider her future marriage options *limited*, to say the least.

“Why the *fuck* would you tell me to come over here to see this?” Dasha yells. Her eyes drag to Roman, who’s looking at the floor in utter shock and horror, totally frozen.

It's okay. *He’ll* be okay, once I navigate us through this.

“Because,” I smile at Dasha. “I have a favor to ask you.”

She scoffs. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Which is?”

My lips curl. “Call off the wedding. End your engagement to Roman.”

She barks a laugh. “Do you have any idea how my world—how *our* world—works?!” She points at a catatonic Roman. “I can’t just—”

“I know you’re fucking your head of security.”

It’s like cutting the marionette strings holding her up. Dasha just…*deflates*, her face turning white as she stares at me in…well…the same way Roman is staring at the floor, like it might swallow him up if he was lucky.

I hold my hands up. “That isn’t a threat. Promise.”

“*What…*” She swallows heavily, looking horrified. “*Why are you doing this*?”

“Because,” I smile, “I want to offer you a deal. You don’t want to marry Roman, and—shocker—he doesn’t want to marry you. Everyone understands that none of this is personal, yes?”

She nods.

“Good. Let's talk deal.”

Dasha drops her gaze to the floor again. But then, I see a look wash over her face, transforming it from stunned shock and horror to…

I grin.

Calculating.

Excellent.

I did my homework on Dasha. She's smart as fuck. Oxford undergrad, then Wharton for business school. Hell, she orchestrated and finalized half the deals her father made last year.

"You want me to be the one to end this because *he can't*," she says evenly. "Because his father wants this even more than mine."

I tap my nose. "Bingo."

Dasha smiles a Cheshire Cat smile.

"Then let's talk about my exit package."

Attagirl.

Roman finally stirs from his stunned silence. He blinks, fumbling for his shirt and yanking it on. His brow furrows as he looks across at Dasha.

"Exit package?"

"Roman," she shrugs. "Come on. We both know how our world works. You think I can just *end* an engagement my father set up for me, and everything goes on as normal? If I could, don't you think I would have done that months ago, when I was first told about this whole thing?"

Roman's face darkens.

"If you want *me* to end this—and I think you do—it's going to mean more than me simply having a conversation with my father." She inhales slowly. "It's going to mean me *leaving my family*."

She glances at me, and I nod. I already knew this.

"Which I think we can agree *probably* means my father won't be giving me free use of his credit cards anymore."

Roman scowls. "Are you asking for a fucking bribe?"

She scoffs. "Wouldn't you?" Dasha sighs. "Roman, he's right. I *don't* want this marriage, because my heart already belongs to someone else. It appears yours does, too."

I grin and put a hand on Roman's knee. He shakes it off, not looking at me.

"For this exit package," I clear my throat. "How does one million sound?"

I don't do handouts. But in certain circumstances, I'm not above swallowing my own pride and asking my obscenely wealthy brother for an amount he's probably got lying around between the couch cushions.

Dasha's brows arch, and she starts to laugh.

"A *million*? For me to walk away from my entire—"

"Let's talk real numbers."

Roman's voice is deep and booming as he leans forward, his elbows on his knees. He steeples his fingers, his face composed, his sharp jaw relaxed but firm.

Fuck me, he looks every inch the shrewd, calculating Bratva kingpin he was born to be right now.

And *fuck me sideways*, is that hot.

"Let's talk about your exit package, Dasha," he growls. "Considering both the inconvenience, and me wasting your time."

She smiles softly and reaches for Roman, taking one of his hands in hers. "You didn't waste my time," she says quietly. "I'm just glad to know the reason you weren't checking me out," she laughs.

Roman frowns but says nothing.

"Well…" She clears her throat, her hands releasing his. "I've seen the ring you picked out—though I'm guessing *you* didn't?" She smiles.

"Stepan," Roman mutters. "Stepan chose it."

"It's beautiful. He's got great taste."

"I'll pass that along," Roman growls.

"It also looked *quite* expensive?"

Roman smirks. "Two point five, I think."

Fucking hell. I turn to stare at him.

Dasha whistles. “Wow, Roman, I don’t know what to say.”

He smiles wryly. “I think you do. It's a number.”

I bite back my own grin. *Shit*, he’s really fucking good at this whole conducting business thing. I guess in my lust for this guy, I’ve never realized how much the Bratva king he really is. But now that I have?

I mean, I didn’t *think* it was possible to be any more attracted this motherfucker. But here we are.

“Well, considering what the ring was going to be worth, and my standard of living, which I’ve become *quite* accustomed to, and the fact that when we leave the way we’ll have to, work will be difficult to come by—”

“We?” Roman scowls.

“*Maks*,” I murmur. “Her head of security.”

Dasha blushes and looks down. Roman just nods, like he’s running the numbers in his head.

“Three million.”

Dasha snorts. “Please, Roman. Don't make me laugh. Twelve.”

Roman smiles. “Am I buying a fleet of Lamborghinis as part of this exit package? Three and a half.”

“Roman, this is my nuclear option. I’m not telling my father I’m *moving out*. I’m running away from my family without telling them. Eleven five.”

Roman cocks his head. “I was under the impression that you and your father got along like oil and water. We both know if you blow this up—”

“*Blow*. *Very* interesting choice of words, given the circumstances, Roman,” Dasha says with a smile.

I chuckle.

Roman does not.

“Four.”

Dasha starts to open her mouth, but Roman suddenly holds up a hand.

“Let’s just be done with this.” He looks right at her. “Eight. We both know that’s more than fair. Eight mil, and I’m *sure* you’ll be able to access more cash before you take off with Maks. That buys you a whole new life, Dasha.”

She smiles wryly. Then she stands. So does Roman. She sticks her hand out, and he takes it.

“*Pleasure doing business with you*,” she says quietly. Then she slips her hand from his and reaches up to cup his face.

Watch it, bitch.

I grit my teeth as I watch her fucking hug him.

“I—*thank you*,” she whispers to him. “I’m sorry—”

“Nothing to be sorry for,” he says gently, smiling. “When will you…”

“Soon.” She swallows. “We’ll have to make some plans—”

“Text me your account number, and the money will be there by tonight.”

She nods, grinning as she takes his hand again. “For the record?” She lifts a shoulder. “You’re going to make a fantastic *pakhan*.”

“Good luck, Dasha.”

“You too, Roman.” She turns to shoot me a stern look, but then it fades. “Be good to him,” she says to me with a wink.

Roman walks her to the door, and I grit my teeth and somehow manage not to commit murder when I have to endure another fucking hug of theirs.

Then she’s gone.

Roman draws in a slow breath, his hands planted on the door to my place, his back to me, his shoulders tense and tight. I grin as I walk over, then start to slide my arms around his waist.

“Well, I guess to the victor go the spoils—”

“*FUCK. YOU.*”

I jolt, shaken by the sheer violence and fury humming off his body as he whirls on me. His teeth are bared and his eyes *black* as they stab into me.

“*You*,” he seethes.

I frown. “Excuse me?”

“*Mother. Fucker*,” he snarls.

I stare at him. “Um, I just did you a huge fucking favor. You didn’t want to marry her, she didn’t want to marry you. I got that fucking ball rolling. I settled it!”

“*I* fucking settled it!” he seethes. “And you didn’t get a goddamn ball rolling! You threw a fucking hand grenade into my entire *life*!!”

My brow furrows. “Okay, chill—”

“Are you fucking serious?!”

“Roman, *relax*. This is a fucking win,” I snap. “Yes, she wanted *way more* than I thought. That’s on me. I’ll talk to my brother—”

“I don’t give a fuck about the money!” he roars, jamming a finger into my chest. “You think I give a fuck about eight fucking mil?”

“I think most people would give a *huge* fuck about eight—!”

“THIS IS MY *LIFE*, MOTHERFUCKER!!” he screams in my face, sending a cold ripple down my spine.

“EXACTLY!” I roar back. “That's what I’ve been trying to get through your thick head! It’s your life! Don’t marry girls you don’t want to! Stop pretending you’re something that we both fucking know you’re not! *Life is too short for that*!”

He shoves me away, his eyes bleeding black smoke, his face livid.

“This is done.”

It feels like glass cutting into my chest.

“Roman—”

“We’re fucking *done*, motherfucker,” he growls, yanking the door open behind him. “This bullshit is over.”

The door slams shut behind him, leaving me with a gaping void in my chest and a ringing in my ears that won’t go away.

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ROMAN

SOFT, choked moans fill the subterranean cathedral space. Torches and candles send flickers cavorting across the walls, and a sense of dark, violent excitement hangs in the air, like a drop of blood in the ocean calling the sharks.

The twin scents of cigarette smoke and alcohol tease the air. Naked or nearly-naked bodies writhe and dance together in the shadow of a looming dais, their faces masked.

Welcome to the Black Court.

It started at Knightsblood, the ultra-exclusive private college tucked into the wooded, rocky shores of southern Connecticut, just outside NYC. WASPy, old-money families send their kids to Harvard or Yale. Connected, new-money families send *their* kids to Northwestern and Stanford.

…Mafia families send their heirs to Knightsblood, where those sons and daughters of *pakhans*, dons and *oyabuns* learn to become kings and queens of the criminal underworld.

Bane, Laz, and I already knew each other. But it was there that we met Carmine and Nico Barone, and Nero De Luca.

And it was there that five of us started all this one cold, dark night, on a cliff high above the crashing waves of the Atlantic.

We decided to call it the Black Court.

There are few “rules” in the criminal underworld. We exist in a tangle of broken laws. But one thing that everyone holds sacred is a blood marker—a contract signed in *literal* blood between two parties, which cannot, under any circumstances, be broken. They’re sacred oaths, and without them, it would all devolve into anarchy and chaos.

This didn't use to be the *only* form of order that our world had. Our fathers and their fathers before them had their own ways of trying to settle things. But those venerable institutions—the Bratva, the mafia, the cartels, the Yakuza, whoever—have limitations when dealing with traitors or broken contracts.

They have to consider all sorts of things before they act—the loyalty of their men and soldiers, for one. Their business interests. Various treaties.

The Black Court is not burdened with those things.

That was the whole point: five of us, from different mafia worlds, putting any rivalries aside to maintain order.

We use our private resources to stay apprised of anyone who's broken a blood oath, and we hold “court”, where those who’ve broken their sacred vows are brought before us for adjudication.

The guilty are given a choice: fight, or flight.

“Fight” means they choose either fists or one of the various weapons made available to them to fight one of us.

To the death.

The “flight” option is a chance for them to run for their freedom—through a winding stone labyrinth connected to our underground cathedral court, with one of us chasing them.

No one’s ever succeeded in either one.

The masks the five of us wear, funnily enough, were a last-minute thought, added on the very night we held our first adjudication back at Knightsblood. Now, they’ve become part of who we are, and of the myth behind the court.

Here, we're no longer who we are outside these walls. We're no longer beholden to the last names that mark us, or the empires we'll lead one day.

Here, we are only the masks.

The Hound. The Raven. The Wolf. The Bull. The Stag.

Right now, *my* mask—the bull's visage with the curved horns and peering back eyes—is hot and clingy against my face. It feels like even the mask knows that tonight, it's doing more than hiding my identity. Tonight, it's a wall between the world and the warring emotions I'm sure are written in neon all over my face.

Across the cavernous cathedral space, the pre-trial party is beginning to unfold. Bodies writhe on couches, masked men and women teasing, moaning softly, and groaning in the low, flickering light.

There was a time not that long ago—though it feels like *years ago* at this point—when the five of us would be much more interested in this part of the evening's festivities.

Now, we're bored hosts idly watching the fun our guests are having without us.

The Hound, The Raven, and The Wolf are all "taken" now, without a *particle* of interest in the array of female flesh on display tonight—the gorgeous women in masks, slowly disrobing, kissing, touching, dancing… fucking.

The Stag? I don't know what the fuck his deal is these days, but he's also thoroughly disinterested in the women around us. As if there's something or someone else sucking up all his attention.

And me?

Well, I've also had a distinct lack of interest in any of this lately, in contrast to even a few months ago.

I blow air through my lips.

Was I interested? I mean, *actually* interested? Or was I just so deep into a role I portrayed to everyone around me that I *became* that character?

This has been on my mind for the last few days, since I stormed out of Val's.

I've been "straight" my whole life. At least, I've told myself I'm straight. I've *thought* of myself as straight because, well, what else would I be? I've slept with women—lots of women—and it's not like I spent my entire teen and adult life "forcing" myself to fuck girls. Over the last few days, that's brought a whole slew of questions into my head.

Among which is… Am I *bi*?

I turn back, forcing myself to watch the scene unfolding across from me. Two women, masks covering the tops of their faces, sensually embrace as they kneel on one of the couches. One is already nude, and I watch as she slowly, teasingly, pulls the straps of the other girl's dress down. When it pools at her knees, the two of them slowly come together, nipples rubbing, breasts squeezing together…their mouths opening as they start to kiss…

I mean, for fuck's sake, it's every straight male's porn fantasy. And as a king and lord of this secret space, I know full well that I could walk right over there and instantly be invited to join them.

But I don't.

I don't even *want to.*

And I have no idea how to digest that—as if I even had the bandwidth for it right now, with a certain *someone* taking up my every thought.

I have every fucking right to be furious at him. Fuck whatever "favor" he thought he was doing me the other day, setting it up so that Dasha would walk in on us.

That wasn't a favor, it was humiliation. My identity and my sexuality are *mine* to share how and if I choose to do so at all.

Making that decision *for me* by arranging for Dasha to see me on my fucking knees sucking a guy off was…

Fuck.

I hate that the rage that boils inside me is tinged with a throb of desire that pools low in my stomach and sends a tingle right to my cock. I hate that even now, after that fucking psycho stunt, I can't force myself to feel anger toward him.

I mean, *yeah*, I'm angry. For one, he's not psychic. Maybe he had a good idea how Dasha would take it, especially since he knew about her apparent love affair with Maks. But the way she *did* end up reacting wasn't guaranteed.

She could have run out and gone directly to her father about it. Or mine.

The cold dread that claws its way through me just considering that scenario is paralyzing.

Or what if she'd demanded even more money? I mean, eight million isn't *nothing* to me, but it's not going to break the bank either. It just involves dipping into some funds, and I *know* that's going to get back to Stepan at some point, which means I'm going to have to lie to him, which I hate doing.

But, bottom line, it could have cost me *zero* dollars, and what he pulled still wouldn't be okay.

Who and what I am is for *me* to obsess, self-flagellate, and agonize over. Not him. Not anyone else.

"Your glass is looking a little light, Bull."

I close the door on any thoughts of Val and lock it up tight before I turn to glance at The Stag as he looks down at me.

"Do I sense an imminent worried comment about my health and well-being?"

He shakes his head. "Nah, brother," he says quietly. "Not tonight." He clinks his glass to mine and holds up the bottle of vodka. "I was actually going to ask if you needed a refill on your prescription."

The towering antlers on his own mask swivel as he shakes his head again and sinks into one of the chairs across from me.

“Nope, no lectures tonight,” he growls, leaning over and pouring a generous splash into my half-empty glass. “Not with what you’re dealing with.” He exhales. “Look, arranged or not, I’m sorry about Dasha running off with some other guy.”

It’s been a week since that day, and I gotta hand it to the girl: she didn’t hesitate *at all*. We met once more after that, just the two of us. She confirmed she’d received the money, thanked me, and hugged me, telling me she hoped I’d find my own happiness.

After that, she and Maks *disappeared*.

Obviously, this hasn’t happened in a vacuum. The Lukashov family is in *chaos*, with Bogdan apparently on the warpath. It goes without saying that *my* father is losing his fucking shit probably even worse, since this means he’s back to square fucking one when it comes to trying to get cozy with Cosimo Sangrini.

I couldn’t give less of a fuck, as long as the secondhand limelight from Dasha’s escape doesn't shine anywhere near me.

“I think we both know how *not* broken up about that I am,” I shrug.

The Stag nods his head. “I know. But still.” He shrugs his broad shoulders. “Arranged marriages in our world are as common as vodka. But Dasha was a good one. Smart, sexy—”

“If you feel like tracking her down and heaping this praise on her yourself, Romeo,” I drawl, “you have my blessing.”

He chuckles, raising a middle finger. “I’m just trying to cheer you up, or if that fails…” he raises the bottle in his hand. “Numb you up?”

“Well, if you insist,” I murmur, extending my glass for another splash of vodka. After I take a sip, I glance up at him again. “You gonna tell me who this mystery girl of yours is?”

“There is no mystery girl.”

“Mystery *guy*?”

I swear, I can see his furrowed brow even through his mask. Then he shakes his head. “Eh…nah.”

“Is it just me, or have these pre-trial parties become a bit of a *bore*?”

The Wolf plops down on the couch next to me, kicking his long legs out and draping an arm across the back.

“I mean, what is the *point* with all these girls, if none of us is going to…you know…”

“No one’s stopping you,” The Stag shrugs.

“I’m not talking about *me*, fucker,” The Wolf growls. “*I* happen to be extremely happy with my situation, thank you very much.”

The Stag shakes his head. “I seriously can’t believe you ended up with a Russian girl.”

The Wolf snickers. “Jealous?”

“More just impressed that you still have a head or a dick attached to your body.” The Stag smirks. “Unless Milena *does* have your balls in a jar somewhere?”

“Keep talking shit about my fiancée,” The Wolf mutters, “and we’ll see whose balls aren’t attached to their body.”

The Stag and I both chuckle, and the former reaches over and pats The Wolf on the knee. “Relax, psycho.”

The Wolf sighs and leans back into the couch, bringing his glass of whiskey under the edge of his mask to sip. “So, what are you emo fucks sulking about here in the corner?”

“I was asking The Stag about his mystery girl—or guy.”

The Wolf perks up. “Hold up. Mystery *guy*?”

“There’s no mystery guy,” The Stag grunts.

“Yeah, but…” The Wolf leans forward, his ears pricking with interest. “*Could there* be?”

“There is no *guy*,” The Stag repeats.

Wolf turns to me. “Well, there you go. There’s no guy. I mean, he’s not gay…” He turns back to The Stag. “Wait, are you?”

“No.”

“Bi?”

The Stag shrugs. “We’re all bi.”

The Wolf chuckles. “*Hard* disagree, pun totally intended. It’s actually quite disturbing how much I love pussy. Well, one in particular. I mean, it's seriously fucked up how much I love it.”

The Stag nods. “Yeah, because it’s *Milena’s* pussy.”

“Yeah, you could go ahead and not talk about my fiancée’s sexual organs ever again, fucker,” The Wolf snarls.

“Hey, you brought it up,” I grunt.

“You also underscored my point, though,” The Stag adds. “You’re obsessed with her sexual organs, because they’re *her* sexual organs.”

The Wolf exhales heavily. “Are you trying to say that if Milena had a dick, I’d be as obsessed with that? I doubt it.”

“I doubt it too,” The Stag sighs. “That’s not what I’m saying, anyway.”

“Well, what the fuck *are* you saying?” The Wolf grumbles. He turns to me, jabbing a finger at The Stag. “The fuck is he always talking in riddles for?”

“I’m saying sexuality, for everyone,” The Stag growls, “is fluid to some degree.”

“This is the weirdest coming-out speech I’ve ever heard,” The Wolf sighs.

The Stag rolls his neck. “I’m *not* coming out. I’m saying we’re all—”

“*Kinda* gay?”

“Were you dropped as a fucking child?” The Stag mutters at The Wolf. “I’m saying there’s a spectrum. Some people are very far to one side, some are in

the middle, and others lean hard to the other side. I get that you're straight, relax."

"And you?" The Wolf throws back.

"Mostly," The Stag shrugs.

The Wolf glances quickly at me, then back to The Stag. "*Mostly*? You're saying you're bi?"

"No, dipshit. I'm saying that even though I'm straight I can still appreciate the attractiveness of men, at least on some level. It doesn't mean I want to fuck them, but I can look at someone like…I don't know, Brad Pitt…and appreciate that he's an attractive dude."

The Wolf takes another sip of his drink. "You know how I know you're gay?"

"*Jesus Christ*," The Stag mutters under his breath.

"Because you just said you were gay for Brad Pitt."

"I can't with him," The Stag growls, looking at me and jerking a thumb at The Wolf.

"The hell are you three talking about?"

The Hound walks over, his perennial dark, psycho energy swirling around him like smoke.

"Sexuality being a spectrum," I tell him.

The Hound stares at us blankly and then shrugs. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Stag here was telling us how he's bi for Brad Pitt."

The Hound shrugs again. "I mean, he's a good-looking guy…"

The Wolf looks up at him. "Well, fuck. Now I'm curious."

"*Excellent* choice of words," The Stag mutters.

The Wolf flips him off and then looks back to The Hound. "Hang on. Are you saying *you're* on that spectrum too?"

“I think his point is we’re *all* on that spectrum,” The Hound growls.

“So… You’d fuck a guy.”

The Hound’s head tips slightly to the side. “Probably not.”

The Stag nods at him. “Okay, what if *Lyra* was a guy? Would you still feel the same way about her?”

“Yes,” he says, without hesitation.

The Wolf eases back in his seat, raking his fingers up and down his neck. “*Huh.* Sex, too? Like, if Lyra was a dude, you'd still fuck her?”

“I love my wife on a level that goes beyond appearance,” The Hound growls. “I wouldn’t care if she had two heads, or no legs, or—”

“Or a penis?” The Wolf interjects.

The Hound sighs. “Even a penis. I mean, my *preference* is exactly how she’s currently built. But if that suddenly changed?” He lifts a shoulder. “Nothing about what I feel for her would.”

The Wolf taps his chin before he suddenly glances at me. “Okay, now I wanna know. Where do *you* fall on this spectrum?”

My chest tightens.

Where do I *outwardly appear* to fall? Or where do I know in my heart that I *actually* fall?

Before I have time for the question to give me a fucking panic attack, The Hound glances at his watch as The Raven walks up.

“As thrilling as this conversation is,” he growls, “it’s time.”

You can feel the shift in the air when he says it. The pre-trial parties are always a certain vibe, even if none of us is participating in the…*festivities* like we used to. But when the clock ticks over, and it goes from party mode to *trial* mode, the whole atmosphere changes dramatically.

The rest of them start moving across the big underground cathedral toward the stone circular floor with the dais looming over it. I hang back for a

second, pulling out my phone to check a message from Evie about helping her move something in her room tomorrow. Just as I'm silencing my phone, an Instagram notification pops up alerting me that one of my friends has been tagged in a photo by someone I might know and might want to follow.

The friend who's been tagged is *Val*.

Of course, I click it, glaring at the screen when the post pops up. Instantly, my entire body tenses.

The guy who tagged Val is the same guy who was draped all over him that night I sort of stalked him…okay, *did* stalk him…at Doomsday. The night we tumbled into the men's room together and…

Yeah.

My face heats beneath my mask, my dick twitching as I glance at the photo that's just been posted by *Gerard*, I gather from the account info.

The picture is of him and some blonde skank on either side of Val, their arms around his shoulders. Val's blue eyes pierce into the camera, a dark, commanding look on his face as Gerard and that slag kiss him on either cheek.

The caption reads "@Chrissygirl19 and I went out a-ho-ing and bumped into our favorite!!" That's followed by about a thousand fucking eggplant emojis and then "RIP our holes LOLOLOL!"

My vision goes red. And that's *before* I see the hashtags the little fuck has ended his post with: #threeway #biguysfuckbetter #gettinglaidtonight #biparty.

"Bull?"

I flinch, ripping my glare from the phone in my hand and up to The Hound, who's watching me.

"We're about to start," he growls. "All good?"

"*Yup*," I seethe, shoving the phone into my pocket.

My pulse twitches violently. My nostrils flare and my jaw grinds. A cold fury I don't even understand seeps into my veins, until my heart is churning black ink.

I'm barely aware of walking onto the dais and taking my seat along with my friends. Of the crowd stopping their orgies and partying to become the audience, sitting across from the dais, a big stone circular floor between us.

I hardly look up when the guards drag in the accused—Bobby Rizzo, an underboss in the Farina Mafia family accused of attempting to kill another underboss in order to evade a blood marker this other guy had on him.

All I'm doing is breathing hot, black fire, my skin charring and blistering as visions of Val moaning with Gerard and that Chrissy skank parade through my psyche.

"Guilty," I say, same as my four friends.

Bobby Rizzo is given the choice by The Raven: fight, or flight.

He picks fight and confidently claims knives as his weapon. It takes me a second to drag myself out of the oozing black tar that my subconscious is drowning in when The Stag elbows me.

"*Your turn, brother,*" he murmurs.

I look up, my eyes stabbing mercilessly into Rizzo down on the floor.

So fucking be it.

Bobby steels himself, rolling his neck, his hand gripping his hunting knife tightly as he sizes me up. He's roughly as big as me, and he's clearly handled a blade before, so he thinks he has a chance here.

Spoiler: he doesn't.

He didn't even before I pictured Val about to go off and have a wild, debauched threesome with those two fucks.

But now?

May God have mercy on Bobby Rizzo. Cause I won't.

He gets one good jab in, which misses me. That’s his peak.

I disarm him right after that, and watch the color drain from his face. Then I toss my own knife aside, slam him to the ground, and start to lay into him.

Over and over and over.

…and fucking *over*.

His face turns to pulp. His body crumples. Blood spreads like a fucking ocean around me and wet sounds of my fists pummeling his flesh fill the cathedral until a hand lands heavily on my shoulder.

“*Bull*. BULL.”

I hesitate, my blood-soaked fist freezing in a drawn back position. I blink, turning to see The Stag standing beside where I’m knelt over Bobby’s body.

“Enough,” The Stag growls quietly. “He’s dead, okay?”

I glance back down at the bloodied puddle that used to be Bobby.

“*Enough, brother*,” The Stag murmurs again. “It’s done.”

* * *

I HAVE no idea what time it is when I'm shuffling toward my building. After the trial I went to Reaper, because I fucking needed it. But even that place said no to me at the door—maybe partly for the manic look on my face, but almost certainly because of the fucking *blood* coating my shirt and still staining my hands.

So I grabbed a few drinks to numb it all in various dive bars on the way here.

I'm fishing in my pocket for my phone when I realize there’s a figure leaning against the side of my building.

A figure in jeans and a leather jacket, his messy, mid-length hair shoved back from his face, his haunting blue eyes piercing through the darkness into me.

I stumble to a stop a few feet from Val, my skin tingling as we lock eyes.

“What the fuck are you doing here,” I mumble, glaring at him.

Val clears his throat and takes a slow breath. “It…occurred to me, that what I did the other day, with Dasha—”

“Could have gotten me killed?” I snap.

He shakes his head. “I clocked her. She wasn’t going to—”

“You gambled with my fucking life!” I roar.

Val frowns. “I get that what I did was fucked up. But you’re being dramatic—”

I surge into him, grabbing his collar and slamming him to the wall.

“*You* don’t get to make that fucking call!” I roar at him. “What you did—”

“*Got you off the hook*!” he snaps. “I *told you* I was going to take care of it for you, that I was going to fix it! The *fuck* did you think that meant?!” he yells, grabbing my collar right back.

I stare at him, fury surging behind my eyes. But instead of exploding, I take a slow breath and level a cold glare at him.

“I think maybe…I don't know,” I mumble, defeated.

“Then stop,” Val groans, his eyes flashing ice-blue fire at me. His hand tightens on my shirt, and I feel my breath catch and my pulse thud wildly. My eyes drop to his lips, and heat tingles across my skin.

“*Stop thinking*, and just *shut up*.”

His mouth crashes to mine, and I swear, I fucking melt. I groan when his hand grabs my hip, the other one sliding over my jaw to cup my face. Our tongues dance and I whimper as he tugs me against his body, kissing me harder and deeper as I moan into his lips. Wanting to just *let go*.

But I can’t.

“*No*.”

With a groan, I plant my hands on his firm chest and shove him violently back from me, my eyes narrowing.

"*NO*," I growl again, my teeth flashing as I jab a shaky finger at him. "Stay the *fuck* away from me."

Val stares at me, his face grim.

"No promises," he mutters under his breath, still glaring at me.

"I have to go."

I shove past him to walk toward the door to my building.

"Yeah, walk away," Val spits at my back. "*So* much easier than actually having a conversation, or thinking about your own sexuality!"

"Go to hell," I snap over my shoulder. "This is me walking the fuck away."

"Yeah, I'm sure there's a closet somewhere screaming your name!"

"Fuck you!"

"Not even if you begged me, motherfucker," Val spits. I whirl just in time to see him turn and start storming away. "And you're right!" he yells over his shoulder as he jams a cigarette between his lips. "We're fucking *done*."

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26

VAL

"I THOUGHT WE HAD AN ARRANGEMENT."

I turn to face my brother as he steps into his home study, where his people escorted me earlier.

Yes, *this* is the current state of coming to see my only flesh and blood: his "people" having me wait in a secure room of his home to await The Marquis "when he becomes available".

When he becomes available.

"*I'm his BROTHER, motherfuckers,*" I want to scream into their fucking faces. "*Who the fuck are YOU*?"

To say nothing of the fact that *he* summoned *me* here. It's not like I just showed up on his doorstep looking to shoot the shit while he's working.

"Oh, wow, *Val*," I say sarcastically. "Shit, I am *so* sorry that I kept you waiting—and *locked up*—in my office for half an hour, even though it was me who gave you a specific time to drop by. I know your time is valuable, and I apologize for wasting that time. How can I make it up to you?"

Vaughn says nothing as he stands in the doorway to the opulent office, wearing a three-piece suit like he's just come back from meeting the King of fucking England.

"That's your line," I mutter. "That's what *you're* supposed to say now."

His brow furrows slightly as his nostrils flare.

“You smoked in here.”

It’s an observation, not a question. I really don’t care.

“Sure did.”

He looks right at me. “You know I’d prefer if you did that outside.”

I roll my eyes. “Then next time, let me *go outside*, instead of keeping me locked in your goddamn study like an unruly fucking puppy.” I glare at him. “I *will* piss on the rug next time, FYI.”

Vaughn sighs as he steps into the room and closes the door behind him.

“My people have strict protocols that they follow.”

He walks over to one of the windows and opens it.

No, I didn’t crack one when I was smoking in here. Yes, that was on purpose. I’m a petty fucker.

“Your *people* need to lighten the fuck up,” I mutter. “Also, do they even know who I am?”

He glances at me. “Of course.”

“You sure? Because they always treat me like the weird cousin no one wants to sit next to at family dinner.”

“Val, we look virtually identical,” Vaughn sighs as he sits at his desk. “Even if they weren’t aware you are my brother—which they are—it would be obvious.”

I shrug. “Whatever. Anyway, what were you saying?”

I know what he was saying, and why he was saying it. I’m just…stalling.

Vaughn levels a look at me as I sit in one of the chairs across the desk from him. “I thought we had an arrangement,” he enunciates slowly.

“What arrangement would that be?”

He rolls his eyes. “Are we really going to do this?” When I say nothing, he inhales slowly and drums his fingertips on the edge of his desk. “A heads up would have been nice, is all.”

Dasha. He’s talking about Dasha, and her disappearing act from the Bratva world along with that tall, sexy motherfucker Maks.

My relationship with Vaughn is…*complicated*. On the one hand, he’s my brother, my only living family. And even if I might have seriously conflicted thoughts about him leaving me there in that warehouse twenty years ago before he escaped with the Syndicate, I know he had his reasons.

He wanted something more for me.

I don’t blame the horrors that came later, with foster care and all that, on him. He saw the chance to hit the reset button on my life, and took it.

On the other hand, though, Vaughn is a lot more than just my brother. He’s “The Marquis”, which is, I've come to realize, much more than just a frilly title. In the Obsidian Syndicate, that title makes him a *god-king*, and with that comes insane power and responsibility.

But since we’ve reconnected, I’ve more and more come to realize that as well as being my brother and The Marquis, Vaughn doesn’t view the world or people the way most people do. To him, the world is a chessboard, and every single person in it is a potential pawn for him to utilize as he sees fit.

Even me.

Yes, we're brothers. But it’s become very clear to me that Vaughn has no issue using the fact that we *are* brothers to manipulate me.

Part of it is my steadfast refusal to accept handouts from anyone. When Vaughn wanted to “gift” me the swanky new apartment and give me money so I wasn’t drowning in bills, I only took them on the condition that I’d “work” for him. That’s how I ended up babysitting Claudia Torvallés at Vaughn’s little dinner party that first night I ran into Roman.

But more recently, he asked me to plant a spy device on Dasha Lukashova.

…And I *didn’t* do that.

This is probably why Vaughn has called me here, has kept me locked in a room for half an hour, and is looking at me like this right now. It's *definitely* why he opened with “I thought we had an arrangement.”

Because we did, and I didn’t keep my end of the bargain.

“Where is she, Val.”

I lift my shoulders. “Honestly? No idea.”

He sighs heavily. “You knew she was going to run.”

When I say nothing, Vaughn’s brow knits darkly, his mouth thinning.

“I don’t think it was that big an ask, Val,” he growls. “I simply wanted to be able to track Ms. Luka—”

“Not everyone is a piece on your chess board, Vaughn,” I growl.

“Agree to disagree.”

I stare at him. “Do you hear yourself?”

He exhales. “Knowing Dasha’s whereabouts would be extremely valuable right now.”

“She’s a *person*, Vaughn. Not a fucking pawn,” I spit back. “She had someone else and didn’t want to marry someone that her father told her to, so she found a way to run—”

“*Financed* by her ex-fiancé,” Vaughn says dryly. “What are the *odds*?”

Shit.

I keep my expression neutral but Vaughn smiles coldly at me anyway. “Of course I know Roman paid her. Do I look like the head of some fucking Bratva family, who deal with everything using brute force? Or the Mafia, who think smartphones are cutting edge technology?” His brow furrows deeply. “No, Val, I am the fucking *Obsidian Syndicate*. I see everything, and know everything, and—”

“You don’t know where Dasha is.”

He grits his teeth and pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Your refusal to play a game *you* signed up for,” he growls quietly, “is just a inconvenience.”

I frown. “Meaning?”

“Meaning Dasha Lukashova was just one way to sway Cosimo’s allegiances.” He shrugs. “The other way is simply…removing the competition for them.”

My jaw tenses. “You mean going to war with the Nikitin family?”

Vaughn makes a face. “War is so messy and chaotic. It’s a blunt instrument: a finely honed blade usually works *so* much better.”

I frown as he stands from the desk and walks over to the window. What the fuck is he talking about?

“You know, at first, I was worried that the machinations I set in place weren’t panning out,” he ruminates.

My brow knits “*What*?”

“When Ms. Nikitin never showed up that night.”

My brother smirks. “You'd think that Club Venom, with their important underworld clientele, would have better cybersecurity for their app.”

It hits me like a plunge into ice water, sucking the air from my lungs. I stare at him, my pulse thudding as I slowly get to my feet.

“Did you fucking set me up?” I croak, my eyes narrowed to deadly slits.

Vaughn shrugs. “I merely…*guided* an inevitability. You were on that app looking for something—”

“Something *private*, you fuck!” I hiss.

Vaughn doesn’t blink. “And so was she.”

I’m across the floor and on him in seconds. Vaughn doesn’t even fight back when I grab him by the neck and slam him up against the bookcase.

“You were going to set me up to do *that* with my *friend*?!” I roar in his face. “Evelina Nikitin is a like a fucking *sister* to me, you fuck—!”

“But you *didn’t*,” Vaughn growls. “*Fuck*, that is.”

I stare at him, fury flooding my veins. “No, but only because she bailed!!” I yell, disgust surging through me. “Exactly what the *fuck* was your plan?! For me to screw my friend?! Then what?!”

“The human need for companionship and intimacy comes before so many other things, Val,” he says flatly. “You were both looking for that. I simply connected the dots.”

“And if she *had* shown up that night?!” I bark. “And I'd fucked her?! Then I’d be—what? Your little Trojan Horse into the Nikitin family so that you could destroy them from the inside out?”

“My my my. It would appear that we truly *are* brothers after all.”

“*Fuck. You*,” I snap, yanking my hands off him and whirling. I shove my fingers through my hair as I cross the room, my breath coming quickly.

“I thought when she didn't show up that night,” Vaughn says meditatively, “that I’d have to find another way into the Nikitin family.”

My heart stills and an icy coldness creeps down my spine as I slowly turn to look at him.

“But it appears,” he says quietly, “that I’ve found a way in *anyway*.”

My stomach drops through the floor.

Vaughn sighs deeply as he walks back to his desk and sits behind it. “I know about you and Roman, Val.”

I slowly start to shake my head. “Not fucking happening,” I hiss.

He smiles. “I haven’t even asked yet.”

“But you’re going to,” I growl. “The answer is no. I’m not going to pull some secret spy, Trojan Horse shit to get you inside that family via Roman. Not fucking happening.”

Vaughn arches a brow. “Why not?”

“Because I’m not like you!” I roar.

He chuckles quietly. “Of course you are. We’re brothers.”

“Maybe so, but our lives have been *vastly* different. You chose *this*,” I snap, looking around the room. “I chose art.”

My brother eyes me. “You also chose the new bike, the money, the glamorous loft apartment…”

I bark a cold laugh. “So those were your way of buying me?”

He rolls his eyes. “Don’t be so naive, Val.”

“Fuck this.”

I pull out my wallet and slam the cash inside onto his desk along with the keys to the loft before I plant my fists and lean right into his space.

“*Take them back*,” I growl. “I don’t want them. I’m not anyone’s goddamn puppet, understand?”

Vaughn sighs, glancing at the cash and keys and then dragging his gaze up to my face. “Keep them,” he shrugs.

“*No*.”

“And if I call them gifts? “

I shudder.

It’s wild that I didn’t see this before. I mean, yes, I knew Vaughn was clearly manipulative, and power hungry, and calculating. But I’m seeing now, for the first time, the full extent of his psychopathic nature. How deep he’s willing to go. How dark. How insidious he’s prepared to be with his methods to get what he wants.

I didn’t see it before because I wanted a family.

And *he fucking knew it*.

My eyes narrow on my brother.

“You want me to use Roman to get to his father.”

He shrugs. “Well, if we're being blunt—”

“You’re shit out of luck,” I snarl. “He and I are done.”

“*What* a pity,” he says dryly.

“Wow. I can feel the sincerity all the way over here.”

Vaughn exhales and sits back in his chair. For a few seconds, we just stare at each other, him impassive, me furious.

Finally, he speaks. “I know you think I’m a monster,” he murmurs.

I want that to be true, but it isn’t, not really.

“I *don’t* think that,” I growl. “I love you. You’re my fucking brother. But… *fuck*, Vaughn,” I hiss, shaking my head. “You make it hard sometimes.”

“You can love me and still think I’m a monster.”

I smirk. “*Monster* might be too strong a word.”

His eyes lock with mine. “It might be more apt than you think.”

We sit there in silence for another minute, just looking at each other.

Finally, my brother takes a slow breath. “I was molded by the Syndicate. It…” He shakes his head. “It just clicked with me, all of it. I was *born* to lead this empire, Val.”

“He says, stroking his evil villain mustache, sitting on his dark throne,” I mutter.

Vaughn smirks and looks away. “I’m trying, Val. I want you in my life. I want to be in *your* life. But the Syndicate…”

“Comes first?” I joke.

My brother doesn’t even crack a smile. “Well—yes,” he says, shrugging. “I do wish there was a way for you not to take that so personally.”

“I’ll try,” I say tightly.

He dips his chin, then steeples his fingers on the desk. “Do you *really* not know where Dasha Lukashova is?”

“Not a clue, and glad for it,” I mutter.

He nods and looks away. “I *will* get what I want when it comes to Cosimo Sangrini, Val, no matter who else might be trying to curry his favor. You can either help me with that, or I can use what I know—”

He grunts as I lunge across the desk and grab him by the collar.

“I’m going to say this as simply as I fucking can,” I snarl. “One, this is *my* fucking life. Two, it’s over with Roman. And three, and you’d better be fucking listening to this one…” My eyes narrow. “If you ever, and I mean fucking *ever*, try and exploit anything about that motherfucker, his life, or his preferences in *any* way, shape or form…”

Black fire burns in my eyes as I look right at my brother.

“I’ll burn your fucking empire to the ground. Is that clear?”

Vaughn doesn’t respond right away. We just stay frozen, glaring at each other. Then slowly, his lips curl slightly at the corners.

“*Crystal*,” he murmurs. His brows slowly knit, all traces of his cutthroat demeanor of a second ago vanishing. “For the record, Val?” he says quietly. “I’m sorry it’s over.”

“I’m sure,” I mutter dryly. “Since it fucks with your plans of world domin—”

“I meant I’m sorry it’s over because you’re *my brother*,” he murmurs.

My hand drops from his collar. “It’s fine,” I shrug. “I’m over it.”

Vaughn’s mouth curls a little more as he eyes me. “Judging from that outburst?” He smirks. “Somehow, I doubt it.”

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27

ROMAN

"I SHOULD RALLY the men and stomp the fucking Syndicate out for good."

My father turns away to pour a drink at the bar cart. I glance at Stepan at the same time he glances at me, shaking his head almost imperceptibly as if to say "just keep quiet."

Usually a wise choice when it comes to my father during one of his rants.

Obviously, shit has hit the fan in the last few weeks in the wake of Dasha's disappearance.

…Thanks to *Val*.

On the one hand, what he did was supremely fucked up and beyond reckless. But on the other?

He did it for *me*.

The upside is that I'm no longer marrying a woman I have zero interest in, who similarly has zero interest in *me*.

The downside?

"It will be total fucking war!!"

Yeah, that.

My father whirls, slugging back his drink before he jabs a finger at Stepan. "If I wanted to attack tomorrow, what would be our best option for an easy

target?”

Stepan frowns, sighing. “*Pakhan*, none of my intel channels suggest Vaughn Bancroft had anything to do with Ms. Lukashova’s disappearance.”

Papa scowls at him. “*Fuck* your intel channels.” He beats on his own chest. “I’ve been in this game my entire fucking life, and my gut tells me Vaughn is behind this. And even if he isn’t?” He smiles darkly. “Chaos breeds uncertainty. Uncertainty makes men sloppy. Now is the *perfect* time to strike.”

Stepan’s brow furrows. “Boss, all respect, but as your number two, I cannot advise—”

“Fuck your advisements, Stepan,” Papa grunts. “Grow some balls!”

I clear my throat. “I think Stepan's right, Papa. The Obsidian Syndicate is *powerful* in ways I don’t think we truly appreciate. European allies, Russian allies…” I frown. “A war with them would be suicide.”

My father glares at me silently, saying nothing. Slowly, he finishes his drink and sets the glass down on the corner of his desk before he walks over to me.

“Papa—”

I grunt when the back of his hand suddenly crashes into the corner of my mouth, sending fireworks through my vision as my head slaps sideways.

“What the *fuck* did you do, eh?!” he roars at me when I turn back to look at him, my teeth bared. “Why did she run?! Caught you fucking around?!”

He jams a finger into my chest.

“I told you, don’t get *caught*, you dumb little shit! And if you do, you remind your woman who she *belongs* to! You remind her of her *place*!”

“*Fuck*—”

A strong hand lands on my shoulder as I step towards my father. I whirl to see Stepan glaring at me.

“*Respect* your father, Roman,” he rumbles.

“*Da*,” Papa snarls, jamming a finger in my chest again. “*Respect.* Little shit.”

He turns away. When he does, Stepan squeezes my shoulder. I glance back at him and he shakes his head side to side, mouthing “please” and looking at me with kind, determined eyes.

“*Not when he’s like this*,” he murmurs under his breath as he dips his mouth to my ear and pats my shoulder.

“I didn’t do anything,” I growl, turning back to my father.

“No? She just ran off?” he snaps, whipping around to glare at me.

“It would appear that way, *pakhan*,” Stepan says. “The Lukashov family is, suffice to say, fuming, and tearing the city apart. If they thought Roman or any of us was to blame, I’m sure we’d know.”

My father grits his teeth. “*Da.* Bogdan and I spoke earlier. He’s…” He looks away, his shoulders lowering. “He doesn't think it was us.” Papa peers closely at me again. “So *it better not be*.”

“It’s *not*, Papa,” I growl.

He watches me, his eyes cold. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed that you don’t seem too upset about any of this.”

“I didn’t want to marry her.”

He snorts. “Why not? Money, consolidation of power, enormous tits?” He scowls at me. “What more do you want?”

My jaw tightens. “Love. I didn’t love her.”

He barks a cold, chilling laugh. “*Love*?!” He sneers at me. “What are you, a sissy boy? A *pidoraz*? Marriage isn’t about *love*, Roman. It’s about power.” He walks around to the other side of his desk and sits. “On that note, it’s time to start playing this game more aggressively.”

Stepan frowns worriedly. “*Pakhan*?”

Papa pushes the intercom button on his desk. “Send them in,” he barks.

His office door suddenly opens. Stepan and I turn to see three surly, gruff, military types stride in.

It takes me a second to recognize the obvious leader, a heavily tanned middle-aged man with silvering, crewcut hair, a stocky build and a scar on his jaw, dressed in khakis and a black leather jacket. But when I do…

Fuck.

“You remember Gunner Krige, yes?”

There’s no stopping the sour expression that spreads over my face.

Yeah, I know Gunner and his men.

Papa hired the South African mercenaries who specialize in hunting down targets a couple of times: first, when one of his top *avtoritets* raided one of our trafficking houses and ran off with about two mil in cash and another two-point-five in coke. The second time was when a girl Papa was seeing went AWOL with some diamond jewelry that wasn’t exactly hers to keep.

I was forced to witness the conclusions to both those “hunts”, and I’m not sure I’ll ever rid myself of those memories, especially the girlfriend.

I also know Gunner and his men via the Black Court, though he obviously never knew me as *me* there. We hired him and his men to track down especially elusive people we’d targeted for trial by the Black Court. But when our first “target” came to us missing an eye and fucking hand, we realized what a sadistic psychopath he was, and parted company with Gunner and his goons.

Stepan also clearly remembers who he is, and bristles as Gunner and his men come to a stop in the middle of the room.

“*Pakhan*,” Stepan growls, turning to my father. “If I may have a word—”

“You may not,” Papa grunts. “Dasha Lukashova is worth too much to not be found or to have someone else find her. You will give Gunner and his men free and open use of our resources, is that clear?”

When Stepan doesn’t reply, Papa walks over and gets right in his face.

“I said is that *clear*, Stepan,” he snarls.

“*Da, pakhan*.”

“Good,” Papa growls. Then he turns to smile at Gunner. “Welcome back to New York, my friend.”

“*Ja*, good to be here,” Gunner grins savagely. He pulls a pack of Dutch cigarettes from his pocket and slips one between his lips, lighting up without asking for permission.

“As I was explaining to my number two,” Papa continues, “you and your men have whatever you need at your disposal.”

Gunner nods, sucking on his cigarette. “To start, we need a base of operations for our hunt.”

Papa grins. “The old club is yours.”

I shudder inside. The defunct nightclub deep in Brooklyn is where my father made me watch Gunner “go to work” on the people he’d hunted for Papa.

The South African grins a toothy, gold-glinting smile. “I remember the place,” he sighs fondly. “Good memories, *ja*?”

Papa turns to grin at Stepan and I.

“*We* are going to be the ones to find your runaway bride, boy,” he snaps. “And when we do, Bogdan will owe me *for life*. Between that and the marriage?” He smiles darkly. “I *will* have Cosimo Sangrini’s ear.” I grit my teeth when he jabs a finger in my direction. “That’s your future, Roman. An empire for the ages.”

He walks over to me, clapping me heavily on the shoulder.

“This wedding will happen,” he growls. “Be a fucking man about it. Do *not* disappoint me.”

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28

ROMAN

Why the fuck are you here?

There are so many lies I want to tell myself. That I need final closure. To tell him to stay the fuck out of my life and to make *damn* sure he realizes that no one can ever know what happened between us.

Or even to warn him that my father has let loose Gunner and his psychotic war dogs to look for Dasha, and that it might come back on him.

But as I skulk down the dark alley behind the Mercury Theater and bring the flask to my lips, I know none of those is the real reason I'm here.

I'm here because I just fucking *miss him*.

I blink, the alcohol burning through my system, making my vision swim a little. For a second, I stop and lean against the wall next to me, looking up at the city and drinking from the flask again, letting the vodka burn away the emotions clawing through my chest.

I know I should be furious with Val. I *am*, for overstepping with the Dasha thing and blowing up something I've tried so hard to keep secret.

…Maybe even from myself.

Because now, when I stare at myself in the mirror and force myself to meet my own gaze, it's like there's a block there, stopping me from saying it, even though it's right there on the tip of my tongue.

Gay.

Queer.

Questioning?

That one is the biggest, lately; but am I asking myself the right question? *Am* I gay? Do I find men attractive? Or is it just Val? *Or* is it just that that particular motherfucker has crawled so deep under my skin that even if I *was* attracted to men in general, I'd be blind to anyone but him?

I suppose that's why I'm here tonight: because I miss him, and the needy, aching feeling I have for him when he's around, touching me, or kissing me.

I'm here because I fucking want him, even if I'm furious at him. Because even if I think about going out into the wilds of New York to find some other man to act on these impulses with, all it does is make me recoil with disgust.

I don't want "some other man".

I want Val.

I want his intensity. The punishing possessiveness in his touch. The brutality in his kiss, the savage way he fucks me like he's conquering me.

I shouldn't want these things, but I do. And no amount of liquor I drink changes that.

Near the back door to the Mercury, I slink into the small alcove by the metal fire escape stairs. I know he's here late, because he posted on his Instagram not even twenty minutes ago about "hitting the weights"—a selfie of him in the basement weight room here wearing a gym tank top, his muscled, tattooed arms on full display and that infuriatingly sexy, smug grin on his chiseled face.

Rehearsals are long done for the day. But I slip into the shadows to wait for him, just in case anyone else stayed late too.

I take another swig of vodka and let it scald its way past the demons taking up residency in my chest. I tug out my phone and open Instagram again to

ogle his last selfie shamelessly.

I know why I'm here. Because I'm drunk. Because I'm lonely.

Because I'm horny, and I fucking want him.

The back door to the theater suddenly bangs open. My pulse jumps when I see Val step out with his heavy dance bag slung over his shoulder. I quickly slug back another heavy swig of vodka before I screw the cap back on and shove the flask into my jacket pocket.

"Hey."

"*Fuck*."

He whirls, instantly dropping the bag and raising his fists. His brow furrows when I slide out of the shadows of the alcove, smiling weakly.

"H-hi," I mumble.

Val's piercing blue eyes narrow. "The fuck is wrong with you?"

I flinch, recoiling and tensing up. "I—sorry, I just… I wanted to see you."

He exhales slowly, dropping his arms and glaring at me. "I meant lurking in fucking dark alleys and sneaking up on people."

"I—I just…" I frown, stammering, my words disappearing and my thoughts colliding together as the burn of alcohol sears into me.

"What do you want, Roman," Val growls.

I smile again, my face throbbing and my pulse thudding as I meet his gaze. "I just…I needed to see you."

Val barks a cold laugh. "Well, here I am. Happy?"

He starts to turn away, reaching for his bag.

"I overreacted."

The word drops from my mouth, halting him. He turns toward me, his face half-shadowed.

“*You*? Overreacted?” he growls. “What a fucking *shocker*—”

“You fucking outed me!” I hurl back.

Val scowls. “Excuse me?”

“To Dasha!” I blurt. “Having her walk in on—”

“Outed you about *what*, Roman?” He growls. “About you actually being gay? Or bi, or queer, or whatever? Which is it?”

I swallow, my ears ringing. “I—I don’t—”

“You have to be something other than straight to be *outed*, motherfucker.”

My jaw tenses. “You had no right to—”

“Maybe not,” he snaps. “I’ll own that. But were *you* ever going to break off that disaster of an engagement that neither of you wanted?”

I purse my lips. “I… *I don’t know*,” I mumble.

Val glares at me. “Yeah, you do. The answer is *no*. So, you’re fucking welcome for getting you out of that.”

I take a shaky breath as I step toward him. “*Please*,” I murmur. “I… I *am* thankful for that. You’re right,” I shake my head. “I never would have ended things with Dasha.” I take another step toward him. “And I’m so glad and thankful that you did that for me…”

Val’s perfect lips thin as his eyes pierce into mine. “What do you *want*, Roman?” he mutters. “Why are you here?”

“To apologize,” I say weakly, trying to force a smile. “I…I’m sorry.”

He arches a brow. “Is there more to this apology?” He looks me up and down. "Or…not? "

My brows knit. “Come on!” I blurt at him. “This shit is new to me, okay?!”

“Interacting rationally with humans?” he snaps. “Talking about your feelings? Or do you mean fucking a guy.”

I bite down on my bottom lip. I hate how fucking attractive he is when he's mad like this. How the blue of his eyes glints like turquoise fire. How his chiseled, steely jaw tightens in such a masculine way.

"D, all of the above?" I say with another attempt at a smile.

Val shakes his head. "That's a you problem. Figure it the fuck out."

He turns, hefts his bag back onto his shoulder, and starts to walk away.

"Fuck you!" I hurl at his back, fury dripping from my lips as I glare at him. "Just…*fuck you*!"

Fuck you for sucking me into your goddamn orbit.

Fuck you for consuming me.

Fuck you for making me want you and miss you so fucking much when you're gone.

Val whirls on me, his nostrils flaring. "Fuck *me*? No, Princess Closet Case, fuck *you*," he growls. "For the record, I can smell the vodka on your breath from here."

I bristle, feeling both anger and shame slam into me. "Why the fuck does that matter?"

"It matters because you're wasted!" he yells.

"So fucking what!?"

I startle as he surges forward. My breath catches as his heat and his tobacco, leather, and sage scent slams into me, pulling every fucking trigger I have. His blue eyes glint in the orange glow of the single streetlight, and something cracks and shatters in me when he jabs a finger in my face.

"Had to drink a whole fucking gallon of liquid courage just to talk to me? To fucking *apologize*?"

I shake my head. "No," I murmur. "To do this."

I don't know where I get the nerve. Not from the vodka, that's for sure. Maybe from somewhere deep inside me that only opens and unclenches

when he’s with me. Or maybe it’s his nearness and his scent and his whole essence flowing into me right now.

Whatever it is, I don’t think.

I just *do*.

I grab the front of his shirt, slide a hand up his jaw into his hair, and yank him to me, slamming our mouths together.

I moan into his lips, not waiting for him to do the conquering this time as I kiss the fuck out of him. He growls, grabbing the back of my hair and making me whimper into his mouth as he kisses me back deeply. But then just as explosively as we came together he’s shoving me away, his eyes glinting as his lips curl.

“That’s not how this works,” he hisses.

We stand there, chests rising and falling as we suck in air.

“What?” I blurt.

Val shakes his head angrily. “I’m not your on-call gay experience, fucker.”

“No?” I hurl back. “Since when?”

“*Watch it*,” he hisses quietly.

“Didn’t seem to bother you before, having your cock sucked by the straight guy. Didn’t mind being my *on-call gay experience* then, did you?”

His jaw tightens as his face goes livid.

I know I’m goading him. But that's the point. I need the raw, unhinged Val right now. The Val that takes away my control and ties my hands over my head before he fucks my mouth. The psycho Val who pins me to the wall and fucks me like an animal. *That* is what I’m craving.

“That’s the only reason you ever wanted me, isn’t it?” I continue. “I’m the fucked-up straight guy. It’s the same reason you’re so proud of never having anything *real* or meaningful. Why you’re this cavalier, fuck-who-I-want, nothing serious, man-whore.”

“The *fuck* did you just call me?!” Val’s eyes turn black.

“You fucking heard me,” I snarl. “It’s why you only have fuck buddies, and why you went after a straight guy like me: so you wouldn't have to risk anyone sticking around long enough to see how fucked up you are!” My very skin throbs as it all comes rushing out. “You think you’re so in control, Val, but all you ever do is run. One-night stands, straight guys, fuck-and-forget. It’s easier than admitting no one could ever love—!”

I gasp, choking on my breath as he surges into me, whips me around, and slams me hard face-first against the wall. My muscles coil and shudder when he grabs my wrists and shoves my hands to the brick, and a chill skitters down my spine when I feel his breath hot against the nape of my neck.

“You think I don’t know what the fuck you’re doing?” he rasps darkly into my ear. “You think *provoking me* is going to make me forget what an asshole you are and I’ll fuck you like the needy slut you are?”

I fucking whimper; a full-on, pathetic, needy *whimper*. And he hears it.

“That why you’re here?” he snarls, his big hands tightening on my wrists and his tattooed fingers digging into my skin. “You want to get fucked, little wreckage?”

“*Please*—” I choke.

He laughs coldly. “I can’t *hear you*.”

“*Please*!” I moan pathetically, my back arching against the heat of his body. “Just fucking do it!”

Val chuckles darkly against the side of my neck. “What a desperate cock slut you are,” he taunts.

One of his hands drops and shoves between me and the wall. He cups the bulge in my jeans, and I groan as he squeezes my rock-hard cock through the denim.

“Oh, you *are* desperate, aren’t you?” he growls, squeezing my dick again and making me hover on that knife edge between pleasure and pain that

turns my blood to napalm.

I moan as he strokes my erection, his breath teasing against my neck.

“*Beg me again*,” he rasps. “Fucking *beg me* to fuck you, motherfucker.”

“*Please*!” I blurt, my head spinning as the alcohol turns to fire in my veins. My vision blurs, my breath becoming choppy and choked as he grinds his thick bulge against my ass and jerks my dick through my jeans.

“*More*,” he snarls, stroking me faster.

“PLEASE!” I cry out, shamelessly pushing my ass back, my legs shaking as I grind myself against his fat cock. “Please fuck me—”

“You can do better than that.”

Fucking hell.

“I’ll do anything you want!” I choke, moaning and writhing as I twist and grind between his pulsing cock and his hand on my dick. “Anything you fucking want,” I hiss again. “I just need your cock inside—”

I moan when he lets go of my erection and quickly unbuckles my belt. The button and zipper of my jeans are next, and I tremble as he shoves them down over my ass, just far enough that my cock springs free. I shiver when he wraps his hand around my dick and squeezes, stroking slowly as his thumb smears precum all over the swollen head.

“Keep your hands on the fucking wall.”

My whole body is trembling, my blood roaring and my skin on fire. My vision swims, my stomach clenching as the alcohol rampages through my system. But when I hear him undo his own belt, it all recedes to the background.

All I give a shit about right now is him owning me.

Taking me.

Making me *his*.

His belt jangles as he shoves his pants down. He grabs my ass and spreads me wide open, making my pulse skip. I hear him spit, and when I feel the wetness splatter onto my hole and drip between my cheeks, the mix of pure filth and aching depravity turns my cock to steel.

"*Val—*"

"Shut the fuck up."

I moan when he spits on my hole again, and tremble when he rubs his swollen cock against my rim.

"You wanted to push me until I fucking snapped, motherfucker?" he rasps in my ear, stroking his cock against my asshole. "Well guess what: *you succeeded*. And now I'm going rip this slutty hole wide open and fuck you with my cock until my cum drips down your goddamn thighs."

He rams in. My eyes bulge, my throat constricting as I fight to not cry out. I hiss through my teeth, my muscles clenching as Val brutally shoves the first two inches of his huge cock into my ass.

"*Take it*, wreckage," he snarls into my neck. "Take that fucking cock like a good boy."

He pushes deeper, and I wince, crying out in pain mixed with raw pleasure as another inch of his cock slides up my tight hole. I hear and feel him spit on me again, his saliva dripping down my crack and getting on his cock as he slides out just a bit, using the new lubrication to push even deeper into me.

"*Oh fuck…*"

"Your greedy little fuck hole takes my cock so good, wreckage," he snarls, stuffing another inch in and making my toes curl in my boots.

Wreckage.

I don't know when I started loving that nickname, but I do. I love being his wreckage, like he's the wrecking ball, and I'm the smashed destruction in his wake. I don't know if I've ever told him that.

More and more of his thick cock disappears into me, prying me open like a hot crowbar, gliding inside my ass as I choke and whine and babble pure, ecstatic nonsense into the wall. His head drags over that spot inside, making me spasm as he buries the entire length of his cock inside me.

There's no slowing down. No letting me get used to it. The second his abs press against my ass, the very instant I feel his cock as deep in me as possible, he's already sliding back out. His head glides against that spot again, making my legs shake.

He spits on my ass again when just his head is inside. Then he's grabbing my hip with one hand, his cock in the other, and ramming right back in.

Sweet fucking fuck…

The sounds that tear and tumble from my throat are subhuman as Val begins to fuck me hard. He grabs my hips, pinning me against the brick with his body as he reams my ass, fucking me deep. He doesn't say a word, and all I do is moan and gasp and shake as the pleasure and the alcohol swirl within me, ensnaring me, dragging me to heights I've never been before as he pins me to the wall and consumes me.

His hips start to pound harder and faster. I drop my hand, trying to reach for my aching cock, but he slams it back to the wall.

"Don't you fucking *move*," he snarls into my ear.

His hand wraps around my dick, and I whine as he starts to jerk me hard and fast, his fat cock plowing into me and hitting that spot over and over.

My legs shake. Reality begins to crack at the edges. My vision blurs, and my balls tighten up as precum drips freely from my swollen cock.

"*Val—*"

"Shut."

Ram.

"The."

Ram.

“*Please, I’m going to—*”

“Fuck.”

Ram.

“UP!”

Ram.

“Oh fuck!”

Everything explodes.

“I’m coming!” I choke as my cock spasms in his hand. Thick, hot jets of white sticky cum spray from my head against the wall over and over as Val keeps pounding into me.

He groans, and his teeth sink into my neck as I feel his big cock swell and then pulse inside me. His hot cum spills into me, and I moan, grinding back on him as he strokes my own cum from my balls.

Reality fades in and out as I gasp into the brick, clinging to the wall for dear life. My legs are shaking, my muscles screaming as Val’s cock throbs one last time deep inside me. He slides out with a wet pop, and then he starts to chuckle.

“*Just like I said*.”

My face heats when I feel his hot, sticky cum dripping down my thighs.

I’m still panting and clinging to the wall as Val moves away from me. I swallow heavily, barely able to move or think as I gingerly twist my head. “That was—fuck, Val…”

“That was the last time is what that was.”

I somehow manage to turn, my steps uneven, my vision blurry from orgasmic haze and vodka. My mouth falls open as I watch Val tuck his cock into his pants and zip back up, his face totally expressionless.

“What are you—”

“Leaving.”

My face turns ashen as I stare at him. “Wait, what? You don’t have to—”

“I told you.” His eyes are black and cold, his lips tight as he looks at me with a frozen intensity that chills me to the core. “I’m not your fucking on-call gay experience. But you decided to push me to give you one anyway. So…” He lifts a shoulder. “That was it.” he growls. “*Now* we’re done.”

Without another word, he turns, hefts his bag onto his shoulder, and walks out of the alley and into the night.

My stomach heaves. I turn and double over, and vodka-flavored vomit comes rushing out of my throat to splatter all over my boots.

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29

VAL

"UGH, THE BAR LOOKS *PACKED*."

Around us, the pounding beats and low lights of Doomsday throb and swirl. Ashley pouts as she turns toward me. I just smile back.

"Sure does."

"*Baaabe*?" she whines, giving me this stupid fucking duck-like look with her lips all puffed out.

I play dumb. "Yes?"

She looks significantly at her empty cocktail glass on the table in front of us, clearly wanting *me* to go deal with the mob at the bar.

Which is categorically not happening.

"Ah, shit, babe." I duck-pout right back at her. "I *would*, but I really wrenched my back when I was working a tough lift at the theater today."

She's instantly all smiles and cooed "aww babe"s as she wraps herself around my arm and looks up into my face with infatuation.

"It's so sexy when you strain yourself dancing. Like you're a real athlete or something!"

I AM a real athlete, cunt.

She grins at me and reaches up to boop my nose. “You stay here. *I’ll* go get us drinks, 'mkay?”

I just smile as she stands. She goes to kiss me, but I turn my head, letting her overly glossed lips brush my cheek instead.

“Oh!” Ashley turns to flash a much lower wattage smile at Brooklyn. “Did you want anything?”

“I’m good,” my friend says dryly to Ashley's already-receding back.

Brooklyn’s smile drops like a stone as she turns to glare at me.

“What?” I smile, playing innocent.

“Really?” Brooklyn grumbles.

“Aww, c’mon,” I grin. “Ashley’s a lovely—”

“She’s not.”

I sigh. “Fine. She’s a toxic vampire. But fuck, that girl can *suck* a di—”

“Ah-ah-ah.” Brooklyn’s face sours as she shakes her head quickly, holding a palm up. “Nope. Gonna stop you right there.”

I wink. “She doesn't have a gag reflex.”

“*Jesus Christ*,” Brooklyn groans, sliding her hands over her face and then glaring at me. “Seriously, gross.”

“Doesn’t believe in the word *no* in bed—”

“VAL!!”

I chuckle when she smacks my arm. But there’s no real mirth in the laugh, just like there’s no real happiness behind the fake-ass smiles I’ve been plastering onto my face for the last three fucking weeks.

Since the alley.

Since I walked away from Roman for the last time.

A dark sourness curdles in my chest when I picture his face and hear his name in my head. I wish I could claim that it’s because his face and name bring up all kinds of negative emotions. But that’s not it.

It’s because I’ve spent three goddamn weeks *not* saying his name or seeing his fucking face.

I wish, *God* do I wish, he could be like other “over and done” relationships I’ve had. Every other time I’ve walked away from someone, I've gone and buried myself in excess and hedonism, fucking my way from one willing hole to the next until they were completely out of my system.

The best way to get over someone is to get *under* someone else, right?

Except this time, for some infuriating reason, I’m incapable of doing that.

Literally.

Fuck knows I’ve tried.

I’ve spent three weeks trying to go back to being “good ol’ party boy Val”. Except somehow, even after I told him we were fucking done, that I was *through* playing his rent-a-gay, hot-and-cold bullshit games, Roman persists in fucking my shit up, even when he’s not there.

I’ve tried to “fuck Roman out of my system” over a dozen times in the last three weeks with various go-to fuck buddies and a handful of strangers. But I can’t even bring myself to *kiss* anyone, let alone fuck them. It’s as if the proximity of anyone else makes me violently queasy, to the point where I literally haven’t even *touched* anyone since him.

Three weeks of sexual abstinence. *Me*!

Where do I apply to be a fucking monk?

There’s no desire—not with strangers, not with fuck buddies. No thrill. *Nothing*.

Christ, I can’t even get hard unless I’m thinking about Roman. So rather than *fucking* the motherfucker out of my system, I’ve been jerking off like an asshole to achieve the same thing. Except I’m thinking of *him* while I'm doing it, which completely defeats the purpose.

Needless to say, I’m losing it. Which is the only reason I called up vampiric, soul-sucking *Ashley* to come out tonight. It’s a Hail Mary—well, whatever the evil, antichrist version of a Hail Mary is.

And it’s obviously not working.

Brooklyn frowns as she looks at me. “Please tell me you’re not fucking her again.”

I’m half tempted to lie, just to see her reaction. Instead, I just roll my eyes and shake my head.

“Second request,” she sighs. “Please tell me you’re not *going* to fuck her tonight.”

“You seem awfully interested in my personal life, friend.”

She glares at me. “Under normal circumstances? No. Far from it. But with *that* bitch?” Brooklyn makes a face. “Val, she’s the worst. And don’t think I’m not curious what you’re trying to escape, bringing her out tonight.”

I frown. “Meaning?”

Brooklyn eyes me. “Meaning you only choose Ashley from your stable of boys and girls when you need a clean slate after some relationship doesn’t pan out.”

“*None* of my relationships works out.”

“Which is why I know Ashley so well,” she says, fluttering her eyelashes and giving me a saccharine smile.

I smirk. “Is there a point to this?”

“Yeah.” Brooklyn pokes my arm sharply. “Who'd you break up with? For that matter, who were you even dating?”

“No one,” I grunt.

“Bullshit. Because Ashley.”

I sigh. “Just… Forget it. How’s Big Dick Energy?”

Brooklyn rolls her eyes. “Nice segue, asshole. Kir is great.”

“Still slinging you that good dick, huh?”

Her face turns bright red. “You realize I know you well enough to know you’re trying to shake me off, and it’s not going to work.” She purses her lips and glares at me. “*Who* are you trying to forget?”

“No one,” I shrug.

“Val—”

“Leave it,” I snap. Then my face softens. “*Please* leave it.”

Brooklyn’s brow knits, but she nods. “Okay.” Her mouth twists as she puts her hand on my arm. “You okay? I mean, you usually *love* my obnoxious yet playfully adorable banter.”

I smile wryly as I lean in to kiss the top of her head.

“I’m fine.”

“Fine enough that you called the toxic vampire.”

“Touché.”

Brooklyn sighs. “Okay, I’m done torturing you.”

“Yeah, for now.”

She giggles. “Consider it a pause.” Her phone dings on the table in front of us. She picks it up and grins. “Whoo! Evie and Dove are here.”

She glances around, then smiles, half-stands and waves. I follow her line of sight and nod my chin at Evie, who points to the VIP section and gives a thumbs up before she and Dove head that way.

Brooklyn turns to me. “Wanna go join them?”

“Nah, you go ahead.”

She turns to arch a brow at me. “Is this you moping, or something else?”

I shrug. “I get the sense Dove isn’t my biggest fan.”

Her face scrunches up as she shakes her head. “It’s not you. She’s a little frosty with guys in general. But seriously, she’s the fucking *coolest*. I mean, you know how good a dancer she is, but have you ever seen her art? Oh my God, Val, she’s incredible...”

She trails off when she sees the grin spreading over my face.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I smirk. “Does Kir know about your girl crush?”

Brooklyn rolls her eyes and flips me off. “She just takes a second to warm up to men. Seriously, come over. She’s amazing.”

“You go ahead. I’m going to head outside for a cigarette.”

She blinks. “Now I *know* there’s something you’re not telling me.”

“Huh?”

“First the vampire, now you’re smoking again.”

I frown. “I smoke all the time.”

“You smoke *a little*. You literally just had one before you walked in here with cunt-face twenty minutes ago. I can smell it on you.”

I glare at her. She grins back.

“If you think I’m letting this go—”

“*Fine*, fuck,” I grumble. “Come outside with me.”

“What about Ashley.”

When I just give her a *look*, she cackles and stands up with me. I scan the club as she goes over to the VIP area and talks to Evie and Dove for a second. My pulse skips when I see Nero De Luca by the bar with Laz and Bane. I whirl, my eyes darting around the place, wondering if I’ll see him.

…*Hoping* I might.

But there’s no sign of him.

I glance back over to where Nero and Laz are talking animatedly. Bane, meanwhile, has his usual scowl on his face as he faces the other direction.

Not gonna lie, that guy, with his perpetual moody dark cloud, has a certain…*je ne sais quois* about him. AKA, he's hot as *fuck*, though in an annoying, *way*-too-straight way.

…Unlike a certain someone who's hot in an "I want your dick but I'm going to pretend I'm straight" way.

I frown, following his steely, smoky gaze over to…

My brow arches.

He's obviously looking at a particular booth in the VIP lounge, but I can't tell *who* he's actually staring at.

It's not Brooklyn. I watch her say something to the other two and then nod at me before she starts heading back this way, and when she does, Bane's dark gaze stays locked on the VIP booth.

Evelina?

Well, *that* would be interesting. "Interesting" like a lion hooking up with a bunny rabbit, but still, color me curious.

But then Dove says something to Evie, stands, and walks off toward the VIP restrooms.

…And there goes Bane's dark gaze: following the shock of silvery blonde and pink hair.

"Hey, dummy."

I yank my attention away from Bane when I realize Brooklyn is standing right in front of me. "Huh?"

She smirks. "He's straight, FYI." She turns and nods across the club at Bane. "*Straighter* than straight. Save your breath."

I frown. "I wasn't—"

“*Sure* you weren’t.” She grins at me. “C’mon, let’s skip out before Vampira gets back.”

Outside, around the corner in the alley, Brooklyn watches me slip a cigarette between my lips and light it.

“Can I bum one?”

I stare. “You don’t smoke.”

“And you don’t tend to share what goes on in that head of yours.” She winks. “I’m hoping if I do the unusual, you will too.”

I roll my eyes, taking a drag of my smoke and then tapping the side of my head. “Trust me, you don’t want what’s up here in amnesia land.”

She sighs and holds out her hand. “Well?”

“If Kir gets pissed, I’m telling him you forced me,” I mutter, handing her a cigarette. She puts it between her lips and leans forward as I flick the lighter for her and hold it to the tip. She takes a drag, then *immediately* sputters and coughs, yanking the cigarette out of her mouth, her face horrified.

“Jesus *Christ*,” she wheezes. “How the fuck does this turn into a habit?”

“Practice,” I chuckle, reaching for the cig. She yanks her hand away. “Not until you share what’s going on in that head. And don’t give me the bullshit you were giving me inside. I know you well enough to know when you’re full of it.” She smiles. “*And*, I mean, I also want to know so I can *help*?”

Yeah, good luck with that.

I sigh, looking away and sucking on my teeth.

Fuck it.

“Okay, fine,” I grumble. “You called it. I was seeing someone, and…” I shrug. “It’s not going to work out.”

“Guy? Girl?”

“Guy,” I grunt.

“If I were to draw from your usual list of why things don’t work out…” She starts counting on her fingers. “Too gay? Too clingy? Too femme—”

“The opposite,” I mutter. “On all counts.”

Brooklyn arches a brow. “Well… That’s different.”

“Tell me about it,” I mutter.

“So....?”

I take a slow drag, then exhale. “It’s…a whole thing.”

“Is the opposite of *too gay* too *straight*?”

I make a face. “Something like that.”

“*Is* he straight? Because…”

I shrug. “I mean…yes, but no.”

Brooklyn looks confused.

“He *claims* he’s straight,” I grunt. “Which would be easier to believe if he didn’t have sex with me all the fucking time.”

She grins. “*I see*.” Then her brow furrows. “So, basically, he’s not out.”

“Not even to himself,” I mutter.

She makes a face, then reaches over to squeeze my hand. “I’m sorry, buddy. That’s…” She shrugs. “Sucky. You deserve someone who will openly be with you.”

I smile wryly. “You think?”

“Uh, *yeah*?”

I chuckle as I take a drag. “If you say so.”

It’s the same reason you’re so proud of never having anything real *or meaningful. You wouldn't have to risk anyone sticking around long enough to see how fucked up you are.*

It’s easier than admitting no one could actually love you.

Icy coldness slithers through my veins, and my jaw clenches tightly.

“Hey.”

I glance up when Brooklyn touches my arm, her eyes locked on me. “I *do* say so,” she says softly. “You deserve happiness.” She smiles wryly. “I hope you realize that.”

I smile as I take her hand and squeeze it. “Thanks, B.”

She shrugs. “Don’t mention it. I mean, c’mon!” She elbows me playfully. “You’re awesome!”

I shrug. “I *am* pretty fucking awesome, right?”

She snorts a laugh. “There’s that ego. I was missing it.”

She brings the still-smoldering cigarette to her lips and attempts another drag. Instantly, she turns green.

“*Fuck*, that is *nasty*—”

I laugh as I pluck it from her hand and toss it away along with mine. “C’mon, let’s—”

I freeze as I half turn. My eyes have just locked on a black car coming to a stop out front of Doomsday.

…A black car that fucking *Roman* steps out of, a giggling blonde in a too-tight dress hanging from his arm.

My chest tightens. My gut clenches. I watch her turn to *kiss his fucking bicep*, and something savage inside me *roars* for blood.

“Should we go back in?” Brooklyn asks, not seeing Roman before he and that slag walk into the club.

“Yeah,” I growl.

Let’s fucking go, motherfucker.

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ROMAN

“Oh my *God*, this place is *so* in right now?”

I genuinely don't know if that was a statement or a question. But I also don’t give a fuck.

So I ignore Anna, like I’ve been doing all fucking night, and slug back the drink in my hand. I don’t miss Bane’s piercing look as he watches me reach for the bottle of vodka in the bucket of ice on our VIP table and snatch it up. But I ignore him as I refill my glass and bring it back to my lips.

Fuck it. Right now, this is fucking *medicinal*.

Anna is still babbling away about God-knows-what. I’m ignoring her. I’m ignoring my friends, too, together with their ladies. Carmine, Lyra, Nico, and Naomi are all clustered to one side of me, making plans to head out to Carmine and Nico’s father Vito’s house out on Long Island in a week. Nero is all cozied up with Milena sitting on his lap, his hand tangled in her hair and his face buried in her neck as she giggles and blushes and only half-heartedly tries to shoo him away while she talks to Brooklyn.

Laz has some girl whose name I don’t remember—I doubt he does either—eating out of his palm as he plies her with his usual bullshit. And Bane…

Well, Bane actually pulled my attention for a second, but only because I thought the fucker was staring at my goddamn sister. But it’s not Evie he’s got his fierce gaze locked on. It’s the girl with the silvery-pink hair sitting next to her.

Interesting.

But not interesting enough to pull my attention fully away from what it is *fully* engrossed in, across the club.

Him.

Specifically, him and whoever the fuck *she* is: the fucking brunette wearing too much eyeshadow, straddling his lap and sucking his neck.

The urge to maim or cause serious bodily harm thunders through me.

It's been three fucking weeks since that night in the alley…my drunken and entirely cringe attempt to…I don't even know. Push him? To what end? Or confront him? Same question.

All I know is, that night he took me somewhere I'd never been—dark, beyond where we'd gone before, as terrifying as it was thrilling.

The fucked-up truth is, that night in the alley might be the best sex I've *ever* had. It's also the most *brutal* sex I've ever had.

I was sore for *days* afterward. But I was also so hard it hurt, and I've spent more times than I can count since that night stroking my swollen cock, trying to recapture the heat of that moment as he fucked me against the brick wall.

But there's no touching whatever that was. Not even close.

A week ago, deep into a bottle, I actually thought about recreating that moment more…*truthfully*.

AKA with an actual partner. Somehow, I forced myself to download Grindr again. But after the tenth guy in five minutes messaged me "throat my cock, daddy" or "bend me over and rail me", I just felt…numb.

Cold.

Sick.

Disgusted, and not because I was thinking about sex with men.

Because I was thinking about sex with men *who weren't him*.

That’s the only reason I let Laz hook me up with Anna tonight: I had to feel something else. *Anything* other than that ache whenever I think of Val.

As if cued by a director with a sadistic sense of timing, the fucking brunette across the room on his lap giggles loudly. She grinds her hips on him, shoving her tits in his face.

He doesn’t want you. He wants ME.

Bitterness curls inside me.

He *doesn’t* want me. He made that abundantly clear when he fucked me against the wall, made me come harder than I’ve ever come before, left his cum trickling down my leg, and left.

For good.

I’ve been trying to swallow that bitter pill ever since, but it seems there's no amount of alcohol in the world that’ll help it down.

Mercifully, Anna finally slips away from my side. She starts talking animatedly to Brooklyn and Milena about fuck-who-even-cares as she pours herself another drink from the bottle on ice.

“Hey, are you okay?”

I smile at the sound of my sister’s voice. My eyes swivel to her as she takes a seat on the banquette next to me, her pink dress fanned out around her and a barely touched—thank fuck—glass of bubbly in her hand. She looks at me sadly, her brow slightly furrowed.

“Roman?”

“All good, Evie,” I mumble. “Just…enjoying the night.”

She smiles wryly, turning to look at Anna, still babbling away at Brooklyn, Milena, and Nero. The first two are trying to be polite and feign interest in whatever she’s saying. Nero looks like he wants to cut off his ears.

“She’s…interesting?” Evie ventures. “How did you two meet?”

“Pretty sure Laz used to sleep with her.”

Evie makes the face I'd expect her to make hearing me say that.

"*Oh*," she says tightly, her face turning the same color as her dress. "That's...yeah."

I chuckle. "Don't let me ruin your night, Eves. Just being a grump."

"You've been a grump for a while." She frowns. "I've been trying not to be annoying about it, but I'm curious, and I care about you—"

"Evie," I smile as I take her hand. "I'm fine, really. Just…lots on my mind."

She makes a face. "Dasha, huh?"

Sure. Let's go with that.

"I guess," I lie, feeling like a piece of shit for it.

Her mouth twists as she pats my hand. "You know I'm here whenever you need, right?"

I grin at her. "Yeah. I know."

"And you remember what mom used to say about yucky situations?"

I smile quietly. "I'm surprised *you* do."

Evie was five when our mom died.

She grins. "When life gives you lemons…"

"Make lemonade," we finish together.

I wink and tap my glass to hers. "Thanks, Evie."

She squeezes my hand. "Any time. You sure you're okay?"

Nope.

"I'm great."

She nods. "Well, I won't interrupt your date. But Rome?" She eyes the drink in my hand. "Go easy?"

"Always."

She goes back over where she was talking to Dove. Anna slides next to me, giggling and talking about—again—I have no fucking clue what. I ignore her and bring my glass to my lips, taking a deep slug and bringing my gaze back to Val.

Suddenly, he turns. His face swivels my way, and when he sees me, he suddenly freezes. So do I, still ignoring whatever the fuck Anna is saying as she wraps herself around my arm. My eyes lock with Val's, and I shiver when I see the way his jaw grinds.

Fuck, why is he so goddamn attractive? Why does he have to be so fucking magnetic?

His gaze drags over me, making my skin sizzle. The icy blue glint in his eyes flashes at me, and suddenly, I can't breathe. Can't think. Or rather, can't think about anything except him, touching me, kissing me, swallowing me.

Fucking me until I beg for more.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

This needs to stop.

But when I open my eyes, he's still there. Still ignoring the brunette on his lap. Still staring at me.

Igniting me.

Melting me.

Turning me the fuck on.

"*Ooooh, baby*!"

I flinch when Anna squeals in my ear. Her hand drops to my lap, and my attention rips from Val to her when she squeezes the bulge there.

"Someone's *hard* for me…"

Before I can open my mouth to say "you couldn't be more wrong", she's crawling into my lap and straddling me.

I scowl, gritting my teeth. “*Stop it*,” I growl.

She giggles. “*Why*, baby?” She grins. “Someone obviously wants—”

“My *sister* is here,” I grunt, grabbing her hips and trying to slide her off me without causing a scene.

She grins. “Mm, sounds kinky.”

What the literal fuck.

I stare at her. “The hell is wrong with you?”

Anna giggles as she drops her mouth to my ear. “*Everything*,” she purrs. “So you can do anything you want to me, baby. Fuck, I’ve been wet for you *all night*.”

I barely hear her, turning my head to glare at Val.

…But he’s not there anymore.

Fury ignites in my chest as I picture him walking out with the fucking skank that was on his lap. Taking her home.

Touching her.

Kissing her.

Fucking her.

I’m milliseconds away from physically throwing Anna off me and storming out of the club to wrestle him away from that cunt when suddenly—

Speak of the devil.

Past Anna, I catch a glimpse of Val dropping into the seat across from me, next to Brooklyn, Milena, and Nero.

The girl isn’t with him.

Anna is purring some fucking psycho shit in my ear, calling me daddy and telling me to break her pussy. Whatever. I’m ignoring her, craning forward and trying to hear what Brooklyn is saying to Val over the thudding club music.

“*….left?*”

Val nods, shrugging. “*…fucked up…batshit crazy…*”

I feel myself grin darkly as he sits back in the booth, sipping a beer.

I glance around, and when I see the brunette stalking out the front door, my smile widens.

He told her no.

Because of me?

I know how fucking pathetic it sounds—how needy and desperate and totally cringe. But it’s all I have to grasp onto as I look at him over Anna’s shoulder, remembering his scent. The taste of his skin. The sound of his voice rumbling against my back.

I wince, whipping my head around to stare at Anna, still on my lap. My earlobe is throbbing.

The psycho just fucking *bit* it to get my attention.

“Well?” she giggles.

I stare at her, my brow furrowed. “*What*?”

She rolls her eyes. “I said, let’s do something crazy tonight.” She giggles again as she drops her mouth to my ear. “You make me feel naughty, baby.” I roll my eyes when she licks the side of my neck. “*You can do whatever you want to me tonight*.”

How about put you on a plane to as far away from here as possible.

I don’t even know why I agreed to take her out tonight. I don’t want her. I don’t want any of this. I just want…

I look up, and suddenly freeze.

Val is no longer alone.

The brunette from earlier is back, with a trim, male-model looking motherfucker.

…And they are *both* sitting on Val’s fucking lap.

My last nerve bends, tightens, and snaps like a twig inside me.

Somehow, I drag my eyes up to his. Val’s looking right at me, pure venom in his eyes as he watches Anna writhe on my lap. His mouth twists into a cold line, and I watch with a fury I can't even articulate as he wraps an arm around each of their waists, making them grin and lean into him.

“*Can we get out of here already*?” the guy murmurs loudly into Val’s ear.

Val just grins coldly, looking right at me.

When life gives you lemons…make lemonade.

The idea hits like a bad cold. But it sticks and burrows deeper, twisting into my alcohol-dulled brain.

I’m confident this is not what my mother meant by making lemonade. But right now, staring at the man I can’t get out of my fucking head, when it’s clear he’s about to go home with *two* fucking people? Desperate times, as they say.

Desperate. Fucking. Times.

I drag my gaze back to Anna.

“You say you wanna do something crazy tonight?” I growl.

Her eyes light up. “*Fuck yeah*, baby.”

My jaw tenses. “What about a threesome.”

It’s the booze talking. I don’t want this *at all*. I don’t want *her* at all.

But I want him, even if it's merely being in the same room as him. Even if she has to be there, too. It’s partly that, and partly that I *don’t* want him to go with those two.

I need to feel what I’ve gotten way too used to feeling with him: that spark, that heat, that *fire* that explodes in me when I’m with him. And yes, I *know* I’m drunk and not thinking straight, and that this is a horrible idea. But all I

can think about is looking into his eyes in that intimate way and feeling the feeling I've been missing since he left me, back in the alley.

…Even if it means this.

Anna's face lights up. "*Shit*, you *are* bad, aren't you?" She grins and bites her lip. "You want me to call one of my girlfriends?"

I slam back my drink, letting the alcohol burn though my system.

Numbing. Slowing. Covering.

"How about another guy," I growl.

"*Ooo*, fuck," she purrs. "You want to see me get double-stuffed?"

No.

"Yeah," I mutter.

Anna's grinning as she turns to survey the crowd. "Him?"

I make a face when she nods her chin at Nero.

"Fuck no," I grunt. "And that's his fucking *fiancée*." I nod at Milena.

"She could play, too?"

Jesus.

"Ooo, or him?" She points at Bane, her eyes glowing. "He's *hot*."

Yes, and staring right at Dove.

"I have a better idea." I shove her off my lap and stand. "Wait here."

This is a terrible idea.

I don't want this.

I don't even want to think of this.

But, *Val*…

All my vodka-dulled brain can think of is looking into his eyes. Of being back in that moment where it's just he and I, and pleasure, and…

I come to a stop in front of him. Val breaks off from making the two pieces of shit on his lap giggle with some joke and looks up at me, his brow arched.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" I mumble.

The guy on his lap frowns. The girl gives me the fucking stink eye. I ignore them both and keep looking right at Val.

"I, uh, wanted to ask you about those motorcycle lessons."

Val looks up at me, his eyes slicing me open. The seconds tick by, and my lip retreats between my teeth.

"Fine," he finally murmurs. He flexes his thighs. "*Off*, both of you," he growls. The two leeches on his lap begrudgingly stand, and we walk to the side, out of the group's earshot.

"Who the hell are they?" I hear myself hiss before I can stop myself.

Val stares at me, an amused look on his face. "None of your business," he growls. "That's who."

I step closer to him, swaying on my feet. "*You…*"

"I *what*, asshole," he snarls back.

"You think you can just *fuck me* and—"

"Oh, *please*," Val groans. "Don't get gay on me now, motherfucker."

My jaw tightens. "I am a *human being*—"

"*So am I!*" he snaps, shoving my chest. "And I don't want to be your dirty little fucking secret!"

My brow knits as I struggle to find the words I wanted to have ready.

"Who's your fucking *date*?" he snaps.

"She…uh—"

“Yeah, I don’t really give a shit.” He exhales. “Okay, we both know you’re not interested in bike lessons,” he grunts, “so ask me whatever the fuck you were going to ask so I can get back to my fucking life.”

I nod, my hands shaking as I slowly inhale and look him right in the eye.

“I was, uh, I was wondering…”

“Spit it *out*—”

“Do you want to have a threesome?”

The words hit like wet meat on a metal table. Val stares at me, blinking, clearly not sure he heard me properly.

“With…me,” I mumble. “And her. Anna,” I blurt, jerking my thumb over my shoulder at her.

Val stares at me, his face shifting between confused, amused, and angry.

“Is this a fucking joke?”

I shake my head. “No—”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m serious.”

He barks a cold laugh. “Me too. *Fuck. You*.”

He starts to turn, but my hand shoots out, grabbing his bicep.

“*Please*,” I blurt, my pulse skipping.

God it feels good to touch him again, even if it’s just his forearm.

“You want to fuck *her*,” Val spits venomously. “With *me*.”

No, I don’t. But the thought of Val going home with those other two destroys me.

I know it's fucking pathetic. But I *need him*. I need to be close to him, to be intimate with him, even if there’s someone else there.

“Look, I just—”

“Fine.”

My eyes snap to his. Val is looking at me with a cold, brutal intensity that sucks the air from my lungs. But I don’t look away.

I don’t ever want to look away.

“Really?”

“I said *fine*, okay?” Val growls. “Now, are we doing this or not?”

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VAL

WHAT THE FUCK am I doing?

There’s a drink in my hand, but how it got there, I don't know. Also, this is the first time I’ve ever been in Roman’s *stunning* apartment—a two-level, glass and metal penthouse with ridiculous views of Central Park—but I'm barely seeing it.

Instead, I’m just watching Roman, my brows furrowed deeply as he sways on his feet near a huge wall of vinyl records, speakers, and sound system pieces, bending down to fiddle with something.

Sensual music instantly fills the penthouse. A drunken, feminine giggle rips my attention from Roman, my eyes sliding over to *her*.

Anna.

I ditched Ashley and Julian without hesitation. But it sure as fuck wasn’t because I wanted to have a goddamn three-way with Roman and this fucking leech of a girl. I glare at her as she raises her arms up, moving drunkenly to the music as she kicks off her heels.

Her dress is next as she reaches down to slowly—I’m sure she believes it’s *tantalizingly*—tug the dress up over her head before letting it drop to the floor.

“*Oopsie*!” she giggles obnoxiously.

Roman turns. But his glazed eyes don’t go to the girl swaying sensually in her bra and panties.

They go to *me*.

His throat bobs as he brings the beer in his hand up to his mouth and takes a deep swig, his eyes never leaving mine.

What the *fuck* are any of us doing here?

“You guys are *way* over-dressed,” Anna purrs flirtatiously as she saunters over to me. I tense when she runs her hands up my chest, *hating* the feel of her too-soft, too-feminine, too-clingy fingers as they stroke me through my shirt.

“Yeah,” Roman mumbles. “Too dressed.”

He yanks his shirt over his head and tosses it aside. Then he’s awkwardly kicking off his shoes and trying to remove his pants without falling over.

Anna giggles again as she turns to him, the sound like fucking nails on a chalkboard. “*Now* we’re talking, baby,” she grins.

He finally drops his pants, and instantly, his eyes snap to mine again.

What, I want to bark at him. *What do you even want me here for.*

“Are you…” He swallows again.

Fuck it.

I pull off my shirt and then slide my pants down. Anna coos and giggles and tries to act all "sexy" as she runs her hands over her torso, cupping her tits before unclasping the front of her bra to let them spill free. She giggles again as she turns and starts pawing at Roman’s bare chest.

I’m pretty sure threesomes aren’t supposed to have this much murder and violence hanging in the air, but here we are.

“Come on, boys,” she purrs, grinning as she grabs the waist of Roman’s boxers and tugs him over to me. Then she grabs mine, too, pulling us both after her as she walks toward the couches.

I’ve probably slept with as many women as I have men. I’m attracted to both, and objectively speaking, Anna is a gorgeous girl—personality aside.

And yet, I don’t give a *fuck* or even blink when she drops her panties and then sits on the couch, her legs slightly spread.

“Well?” she giggles, patting the couch invitingly. “Are we doing this?”

I don’t move. Roman shuffles over to her, avoiding my eyes as he sits.

Guess we are.

I’ve barely sat down on Anna’s other side when she turns, grabs Roman’s face, and presses her lips to his.

I won’t lie: the images that immediately flash through my head are of ripping her hands off and choking her with them, or squeezing her dainty fucking throat until blood seeps from her eyes.

The fuck…

But even though I’m well aware how psychotic my thoughts are, I can't stop them—not when she’s still fucking *kissing him*.

When she finally pulls away, grinning, Roman’s eyes immediately find mine. There’s fear in them—plus hesitation, and a dash of pleading.

Fuck you, my eyes say right back to him. And in a flash, I’m grabbing Anna’s hair in a fist and slamming her to my mouth. She moans as she kisses me, crawling into my lap as she does.

But my eyes are wide fucking open, looking *right at* that motherfucker sitting behind her. His eyes turn black, and there’s vicious tension in his jaw as his lips curl, baring his teeth.

YOU wanted this, you goddamn motherfucking coward, my gaze roars at him. *This is YOUR fucking fault*.

Anna is panting heavily, her face flushed as she pulls away. Her eyes fill with lust as she turns around and gets on her knees. She glances back at me, grinning coyly as she bends over, wiggling her ass.

“After *that* kiss, you get to go first,” she giggles.

Then she turns to Roman and reaches for the waist of his boxers. I watch with *fury* surging and roiling inside me as she tugs them down.

He's not very hard, but that doesn't stop her from reaching out and wrapping a hand around his cock.

That's my breaking point.

I could tell myself this is no different than the hundreds of three-ways I've had before—just another night of carefree, purely physical fun.

But that would be a lie, and the second she fucking touches him like that, the lie collapses like crumbling sand.

Fuck this.

I'm done.

"Hey—what's he doing?!"

I ignore her whiny voice as I stand from the couch and storm over to where I left my clothes. I yank on my pants and shoes, grab my shirt.

Then I'm gone.

It's raining when I get outside, pulling my shirt on and shoving a cigarette into my mouth. Headlights and horns wash over me as pedestrians rush through the deluge to get somewhere dry.

The lighter sputters in the rain a few times before I duck into an alcove in the alley next to Roman's building and finally get the cigarette lit.

My eyes are manic as I suck heavily on the smoke, filling my lungs with hatred and pain.

I'm fucking shaking when I exhale.

What the fuck am I feeling right now?

"Hey!!"

I turn to see Roman storming out the front door of his building, a confused, angry look on his face as he tugs a t-shirt down over his bare chest.

I ignore him, stepping from the alcove and leaning against the wall as I take another drag, rain falling over me and soaking my clothes.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Roman spits as he barrels down the alley before coming to a stop in front of me.

“Smoking.”

“I mean…why the fuck did you just *leave*—”

“Fuck you.”

My eyes slide to his, watching as they narrow on me. “What the fuck is your prob—”

“YOU ARE, motherfucker!!” I roar, scaring a pedestrian as he rushes past. I push off the wall, venom in my veins as I jam a finger against Roman's chest. “*YOU are my fucking problem*!” I snarl.

His eyes widen with fear and something I can’t identify as they dart over my face.

“I—”

“You’re *with me*, then you’re not!” I roar. “You’re hot, then cold. You’re confused, and confused, and fucking *confused*—”

“Val, I’m not gay—”

My cold laugh cuts like a blade through the air.

“You keep fucking saying that, like a goddamn broken record!! And holy *Christ*, am I sick of that song!!” I scream, jabbing him in the chest again.

He shivers, his throat working overtime, his eyes wide and terrified.

“I—I *can’t*—” he finally stammers, mumbling, his mouth opening and closing without any words coming out as the rain sheets over us. “*Val…*”

“I told you,” I hiss, my eyes slicing into him. “Roman, I don’t give a *fuck* if you’re gay, bi, queer, straight, *whatever*! I *don’t fucking care*!!”

“Then what the fuck *do* you care ab—”

“I care if you’re *MINE*!!” I yell in his face, grabbing him by the neck of his t-shirt. “That's all!”

If this were the movies, and we were Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant, all our bullshit and baggage would crash to the ground right now, and we’d collapse into each other’s arms.

But this isn’t a movie.

Roman goes silent, his eyes still wide, his jaw trembling. Cars splash by in the puddled streets, people rush home past the mouth of the alley, umbrellas and newspapers held over their heads.

But here, in this frozen moment between us, nothing happens at all.

I choke out a bitter, quiet laugh as I take one last drag on my cigarette and toss it away.

“I think that silence is all we need to hear,” I murmur, shaking my head. “This was doomed from the start, wasn’t it.”

“*Val*…”

God, do I love the way my name falls from his lips like a broken prayer. But it’s not enough, and we’re both too late.

“Have a good life, Roman,” I growl, turning to walk out of the alley.

A hand suddenly grabs my arm. I pause, half-turning and letting my gaze sweep over him.

Fuck.

Roman’s shaking all over, his face haggard and his eyes wide, like he’s literally on the brink of tears or a complete meltdown. I let myself turn fully, facing him as he stands there soaked and trembling.

Still silent.

My head slowly shakes side to side. “I can’t keep guessing,” I murmur, my gaze piercing into his.

His eyes close tightly. “Guessing what,” he chokes.

He gasps quietly when I grab his jaw, forcing him to look at me. “You fucking *know* what,” I growl. “I can’t read your fucking mind. I *need you to tell me*.”

His lower lip trembles as his eyes plead with me, so wide, so fearful, so fucking scared of taking that last step.

“I—*I don’t know what you’re asking—*”

“Yes, you do,” I say quietly, stepping even closer, until my wet chest is pressed to his soaked shirt. “*Roman.*…”

He takes a shaky breath, his eyes darting over my face.

“Do you want me to stay?” I growl.

“I—” He shudders. “I don’t want you to leave…”

“That’s not what I asked.”

He whimpers when I cup his jaw tighter, my eyes blazing into his as my thumb traces his bottom lip.

His throat works.

He trembles against me.

…He says nothing.

My heart sinks as the cold smile slices across my face.

Like I said: this isn’t the fucking movies.

“If you can’t answer that,” I mutter quietly, shaking my head. “*Fuck*.”

My hand drops from his face, and I turn to go.

…Until suddenly he grabs me, and I blink in shock as he spins me around, pins me to the wall with both hands cupping my face, and looks right into my eyes.

“No, I *can* fucking answer that,” he chokes, his lower lip trembling. “*Don’t ever leave*.”

And then he kisses me.

He. Kisses. *Me*.

The world stops spinning.

My heart stops beating.

And all I know and all I can do is kiss him back as we collapse into each other as the rain pours down.

Fucking beat that, Hugh and Julia.

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32

ROMAN

IT TAKES me ten fucking minutes to convince Anna to get dressed and follow me downstairs, where I grab her a cab and force her into it.

I don't really remember what I tell her.

I don't care, either.

The second I get back to my penthouse he's on me. *That* is all I care about.

I moan into his mouth, gasping as he slams me against the door, attacking me with his mouth, his hands, his teeth, his body. He yanks off my shirt, his hands grabbing my hips as he drops his mouth to my neck. He bites and sucks and licks, like he needs to taste every goddamn square inch of my skin, leaving me moaning and writhing as my fingers slide into his hair.

No one's ever touched me like this, treated me like I'm this fucking gift they've been dying to unwrap. No one has ever *wanted me* so viciously and wildly, and it has me melting for him.

I yank at his shirt, moaning as he wraps his lips around one of my nipples, his teeth nibbling and biting as I gasp sharply. I finally manage to tear off his shirt, and groan as my fingers greedily slide over his tattooed, grooved body.

"*Fuck*," I groan, grabbing his face and pulling him back up to kiss him madly. "*So fucking hot*," I moan as he yanks my belt open.

My hands slide down his abs, shaking as they tug open his pants. We groan into each other's mouths as we push away from the door, dropping our pants, kicking them away in tangles as we stumble toward the couch.

"*Not the fucking couch*," he growls, pulling back, his eyes blazing blue fire. "Not until you have that thing professional cleaned. Her bare ass was all over—"

"*Stop talking*," I groan as I slam my mouth to his again. "I never need to remember any of that ever again."

"That makes two of us, wreckage," he hisses as he reaches down to cup my dick through my boxers. I groan when he squeezes me, stroking my cock as we shuffle across the floor toward the stairs, half tripping over our feet.

For the first time since I moved in, I fucking *hate* that there's a staircase between me and my bed. Our boxers come off as we go crashing and tumbling up. I only make it halfway before I stumble. I curse as I go falling forward onto my hands and knees. Before I can get back up, his big hands are grabbing my hips and pinning me face down on the steps.

Oh fuck…

I moan wildly when I feel his mouth on my balls. I shudder, whimpering and choking for air as his wet tongue snakes all over them, his hand wrapping around my cock. He starts to slowly pump his fist up and down, sucking one of my balls into his mouth as I cry out, shaking, on all fours, desperate for him.

"*Fuck*, wreckage," he groans, tonguing my balls. "I fucking love how big this fucking cock gets for me. How swollen these heavy balls get with cum for me."

I whimper as he sucks one into his mouth again before letting it slip from his soft lips with a wet *pop*.

"You got a big load of cum in there for me, don't you? Such a good boy."

I'm shaking, completely unable to speak, my cheek pressed flat to the step, my breath choked gasps as he slurps on my balls and slowly jerks me off.

His tongue dances higher, tracing over my taint as my eyes bulge and my mouth falls open.

"*Val…*"

I cry out when his tongue swirls over my asshole, the tip teasing my ring. My legs shake, my toes curling and digging into the stairs as Val moans into my ass and starts to fuck me with his tongue. His fingers slide up and down my swollen, bulging cock, pumping precum from my head to drip all over the stairs.

I shudder when his mouth moves over one cheek, biting me.

"*You need to get this ass up these fucking stairs, wreckage,*" he growls in a deep, almost demonic voice. I've never heard this tone before, but it turns my blood to fire in milliseconds. "*Right the fuck now*."

I don't honestly know how I stumble the rest of the way up to the bedroom. Maybe it's his heat and scent right behind me, teasing my senses. The feel of his hungry gaze dragging like knives over my skin. But when I do finally get there, I only half-turn before he's all over me.

I shiver as he literally *picks me up*—I mean, fucking *what?*—and carries me over to the bed. We both crash down onto it, my hands clawing at his chest and clutching his face as he kisses me deeply. I moan into his lips, kissing him back and groaning when I feel his thick erection grind against mine.

"Well well," Val growls, biting my lower lip. His hand snakes between us, his fingers wrapping around both his cock and mine and squeezing. "*Now* someone's nice and fucking ready," he hisses, jerking us off together.

I gasp into his mouth, lost in the sensation of our hot erections pulsing together, his fingers stroking, his abs and chest muscles rippling against mine.

"*She* couldn't get you hard," he snarls possessively as he pumps my dick faster. "Only *I* can make this fucking cock nice and big and drippy, right?"

"*Only you,*" I moan, rolling my hips against him.

“It’s *my* hand you want stroking this pretty fucking dick, wreckage,” he hisses. “My *mouth* you want wrapped around it.”

"*Yes*," I moan eagerly, shuddering as I raise my hips to his, over and over.

“You’re fucking leaking all over my dick, wreckage,” he murmurs darkly as he nibbles on my lips. “You want my mouth wrapped around your cock and my tongue stroking you?”

“*Please*!” I choke, gasping and shaking as he rolls his hips, fucking his cock back and forth against the underside of mine.

Val chuckles darkly.

“*Show me how bad you fucking want it*.”

I shiver as he pushes me back across the bed until my head slips over the edge of it.

“Don’t fucking move.”

Fuck, I love the authoritative way he speaks to me like that. The commanding tone, the domineering attitude. It’s so unapologetically *him*.

I bite my lip, my eyes following him as he walks around to the side of the bed, his heavy cock bouncing in the air. He stands right by my face, stroking his cock an inch away from my mouth.

“Open wide, baby,” he growls, slowly stroking his huge cock. Precum beads at the tip, and I moan when I see a thick white drop slowly trickle down the underside of his shaft and then down his heavy balls.

I shiver, heat thrumming through me as he fists his cock and taps the swollen head against my lips, smearing precum across them.

“I said *open*.”

“*Yes, sir*.”

I don’t know why I say it. But when I do, vicious heat slithers through me, making my skin erupt with fire. Val’s jaw clenches tight, his eyes blazing.

He groans and drops a hand to my throat, his tattooed fingers wrapping around it as our eyes lock.

"*Now, wreckage*."

My mouth opens, and I moan as his fat cock slides in, stretching my jaw wide. Val groans, his abs flexing and clenching as my tongue swirls over his head. I hollow my cheeks, sucking greedily on his cock as I take him deeper into the back of my throat. I gag a little but I keep going, swallowing as precum and spit drips out of the corners of my mouth.

Val's face is pure ecstasy. There's a savage glint in his eyes, his jaw clenched tight as he groans and starts to fuck my mouth.

I love this power I have over him. Knowing it's *me* who makes him like this, like he can barely control himself.

His hips pump, gliding his swollen, glistening wet cock in and out of my hungry mouth. He groans deeply and leans over me, supporting himself with a fist on the bed as he lowers his mouth to my aching, hard cock.

Oh fuck…

I moan around him, slurping even louder and wetter on his hot, hard dick as he takes me all the fucking way into his throat.

Holy CHRIST.

I try to pull away from him to let out a moan, but Val's hand tightens around my throat, keeping me where I am as he thrusts his cock deep into my mouth.

The sensation of my control being taken from me does what it always does when it's him doing it: somehow, I get even *harder*, my dick throbbing and twitching in his mouth and my moans humming through his. Val drops his mouth again, swallowing me all the way to the balls as my eyes roll back in my head.

He lets go of my throat, bringing that hand up to cup my balls as he starts to gag himself on my dick. Spit and precum drip down, and I groan as he strokes it wetly over my swollen balls. He takes me deep again as he fucks

my mouth, his finger slowly teasing lower, until I whimper when I feel him push against my hole.

Ohh…

My eyes roll back as he sinks his finger inside, pushing deep, stroking against my prostate—that spot inside that makes me break apart at the seams when he touches it.

My whole body starts to shake, every muscle in my body clenching tightly as I whine and hum and moan, drooling all over his beautiful, pulsing cock.

Val groans, sliding his mouth off my cock but still finger-fucking me.

"*Fuck!*" he hisses. "Fuck, wreckage, you're gonna make me fucking come."

All I can do is whimper and thrust my hips up, his finger on my prostate pushing me higher and higher, until I swear I'm going to come without *anything* touching my actual dick.

"You wanna come with me, baby?" he hisses, swirling his tongue over my head as I cry out around his cock. His hips pump harder and faster, fucking my mouth hard as spit drips all down my face.

"Because you're gonna make *me* fucking come. And when I do, and fill your hot mouth with my cum, I want you to fucking *keep* it there, understand?"

I mewl and moan, humming and whimpering around him as I feel my balls start to tense up.

Val groans, and when he drops his mouth back to my cock and takes me right to the base, I'm gone.

Lost.

Shattered.

I see *stars* as I explode into his mouth. He groans, sliding up until only my head is inside, his tongue swirling around my glans as my balls pump rope after rope of hot cum into his mouth.

Then he's coming too.

Thick, sticky, sweet jets of his cum blast into my mouth. I groan, my eyes rolling back as I greedily swallow the first burst. But then I remember what he said, and as he keeps coming, I do everything I can to keep it in my mouth, even when I feel it start to leak out of the corners and slowly drip down my face.

I'm still twitching as he slowly slides his mouth off my cock.

Still pulsing, with cum dripping down my shaft.

Still *fucking hard*.

Val stands upright, removing his swollen dick from my mouth. He helps me slide back up onto the bed. Then he grabs me by the throat and shoves me back against the pillows at the head of the bed.

I shiver, my mouth still tightly closed, my eyes wide as he pushes between my legs, cups my face, and lowers his mouth to mine.

It's not until he kisses me that I realize why *his* mouth has been closed, too.

Fuck…

He pushes my cum out of his mouth and into mine, letting it mix with his own as our tongues dance together. I can feel our loads dripping out of my mouth, oozing down my chin and onto my chest.

He keeps kissing me, and I can't for the life of me stop kissing him.

And I'm still. So. Fucking. HARD.

I moan when Val reaches down and wraps his hand around my dick.

"*Fuck*, yeah," he groans. "Baby, I love how hard you stay."

"*That's all you*," I choke.

Our eyes lock as he rolls his hips, nudging his erection against mine.

"*Goddamn right*."

He kisses me again, and when he takes my cock in his hand, I moan deeply into his lips. I shiver as the thick head of his cock slides down over my

balls, gliding through the cum and spit covering me until it lodges against my hole.

"*Val—*"

"Don't worry, wreckage," he groans, a glint in his eye and a smug grin on his face. "I'm going to fuck you. But you can still beg for it if you want."

I tremble as I reach up and cup his face, bringing my lips to his.

"*Please fuck me*," I growl. "I want you fuck me, and fuck me, and then—*fuuuuuckk*…!"

I scream the last words as Val suddenly pushes the head of his cock past my tight ring. I clench around him, shivering at his massive size. But there's so much spit and cum coating his cock and my ass that there's no resistance as he begins to ease more of his big dick into me.

"*You're so fucking big*!" I choke.

"*And you're going to take every fucking inch of it like a good boy, aren't you*?"

Fucking HELL.

I reach down, hooking my arms under my knees and shamelessly spreading my cheeks wide. Val slides another few thick inches into me, and my eyes roll back and my cock jumps.

"*There* we go," he groans, feeding more of his cock up my ass. "Fucking taking it like such a greedy little slut."

Oh shit.

I don't know why, but I fucking *love* when he talks to me like this. I love when he calls me wreckage, and baby, and good boy, and all of that. But when he calls me "his slut" or "his little fuck hole"?

God*damn*, does it drive me fucking crazy. Which might mean *I* am crazy. But right now, I couldn't give less of a fuck.

If I'm crazy, I'm crazy for him, and that's all that matters.

“*Fuck me, sir,*” I groan, grunting deeply when Val buries the last few inches of his thick erection in my ass. My eyes roll back, my hands clawing at his hips as my legs spread even wider for him.

Val’s eyes lock with mine as he wraps his hand around my pulsing cock.

“Now be a good little fuck toy, Roman,” he purrs, “and open that tight ass up so I can fuck you like you deserve.”

He glides out until just his huge, swollen head is spreading me open. Then he fucks right back into me, sinking every goddamn inch of his gorgeous dick deep inside. I throw my head back, moaning as he falls into a rhythm, pumping his fat cock in and out of my ass, the head gliding back and forth against my prostate, turning my dick to steel as I drip precum all over his hand.

He leans over me, and when his mouth finds mine, I kiss him desperately, tasting his cum and mine as our tongues dance. His cock pounds into me over and over, filling me up, his muscled hips smacking my ass with every thrust.

He’s still jerking and milking my cock, and as he fucks into me over and over, I begin to feel the cum boiling in my balls.

“*Fuck, baby*—!” I choke, gasping against his mouth and pressing my forehead to his as my face crumples. “Fuck…Val…shit, I—”

“Come for me, wreckage,” he growls into my neck, sinking his teeth into the sensitive skin. “I want you to come. I want you to make a fucking mess for me.”

He rams into me harder and faster, fucking the *hell* out of me as I start to shake from head to toe. I fight to keep my gaze locked on his. But as I start to tumble over the edge, my whole face clenches up and my eyes squeeze shut.

“*VAL!!!*”

I scream his name as I start to come, my cock spasming and pulsing in his hand as cum *shoots* out of my head. Hot, thick, white ropes spurt across my abs and chest, with more running down my cock and his hand.

Val doesn’t stop. He doesn’t even slow down. He just groans, thrusting into me, his mouth an inch from mine.

I crush my lips to his, kissing him harder and deeper, feeling him glide over that spot inside again and again.

I’m *still* fucking hard, free-floating in that numb, mind-bending place that comes right after orgasm.

My whole body is still tingling and pulling, my ass swallowing his huge dick on every thrust as he reams me out.

Good fucking God, I think I’m going to come again.

I grab his face, crushing my lips to his and pulling him down to me. Val groans, wrapping one arm around my neck and yanking me against him as he fists my cock in his hand.

“*Fuck,*” he chokes breathily against my mouth. “Fuck, *Roman*…”

“*Come in me,*” I moan, shuddering and writhing as the orgasm—*a fucking third one*—begins to tingle through my fingers and toes. “*Please come in—*”

“*Roman*!”

His mouth sears to my lips, his tongue plunging inside to dance with mine as he buries every inch of his huge cock deep in my ass.

And when I feel him begin to pulse and jerk, and feel the first hot flood of his cum, I shatter.

I kiss him wildly, madly, a clash of teeth and lips and tongues as he groans and pumps his cum into me. My cock lurches and pulses in his hand as cum erupts from the tip to splatter over my abs.

He slides out, then back in, then out, then in. My vision blurs, and my whole body begins to shake and hum and quiver.

My last thought is “did that man just make me come *three fucking times?*”

Then I black out.

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33

VAL

"I WOULD *NOT* HAVE GUESSED you were a Billy Joel fan."

Roman glances over from the kitchen area of his open-concept penthouse, a sheepish look on his face.

"I…" He opens his mouth, then closes it again and shrugs. "Yeah."

"Hold up. What were you going to say?"

"N-nothing."

I roll my eyes, leaning against the shelves and shelves of vinyl. "Bullshit. Say it."

"Forget it."

"*Roman*…"

He sighs, putting down the bottle he's just pulled from a shelf. "Okay. I was going to make up some excuse about why I have it—"

"By 'it' you mean literally every Billy Joel record, including live albums and European imports. On vinyl. Here."

He glares at me. I grin back. Then his brows raise as he runs his gaze over me.

"You…wanna put on some pants?"

I glance down at my dick.

“Not particularly. Why, do you mind?” I wink at him, loving the way his face turns red.

“Not in the least,” he says, his voice dropping as his gaze lingers on my cock.

“Good.” I grab the base of my junk and wave it at him, making him crack up. “Because I’m not. Also, this doesn’t get you out of the Billy Joel question.”

“What the *fuck* is wrong with Billy Joel?” he mutters.

“Nothing! But I said it, and you got all immediately defensive!” I laugh.

He sighs and pours a glass of whatever’s in the bottle. “Fine. Most people I’ve had over…” He shrugs. “Just don’t get Billy Joel.”

“And by *most people*,” I mutter. “You mean girls that you’ve brought over to fuck in a vain attempt at—”

“Okay, okay, we get it,” he groans. “And Billy Joel is not a *guy* thing.”

When I eye him, waiting for more, he finally caves.

“My mom loved Billy Joel.”

I nod, giving him a warm smile. Evie’s told me about their mom passing away when Evelina was just five. Which means…

“I was twelve when she died,” he says quietly, like he's reading my mind.

He inhales and exhales slowly, takes a sip from his glass, and walks over to where I’m standing by the records. He’s not wearing much more than me, just boxers. But somehow it makes him look…*classy*. And it makes me feel like a weirdo savage to have my dick out.

“I’m gonna go put on some pants,” I grunt.

“Don’t.”

I grin as my gaze drifts back to him. “Oh?”

He blushes, shrugging. “I mean… You don’t have to.”

“No no, that’s a whole other vibe than the frantic *don’t* of a second ago.” I grin when he blushes deeper, and step closer. “Why don’t you want me to put on pants, Roman?”

He smirks. “Because.”

“Because…e?”

“Because you have a pretty cock.”

I snort a laugh, throwing my head back and cackling.

“*Pretty*?”

“Fine,” he grumbles, sighing. “Handsome. Sexy.”

“Debonair? Can we throw debonair in there?”

“Sure. You have a *debonair* cock, and I’d prefer you didn't cover it up.”

“Done. Pant-less it is.”

Roman grins. He reaches up, and I groan when he drags his fingers along my bare chest. His eyes drop to one of my tattoos as he traces over it.

“Think you’ll get more?”

I snort. “Always. You?”

He nods. “Yeah. I like the pain and the process. It’s…”

“Cathartic?”

He smiles as his eyes meet mine. “Exactly. Same for you?”

I nod. His gaze drops back to my skin as he traces his fingers over my shoulder and down my bicep until he gets to that frenzied patch of chaotic ink.

His finger stops, and a cold shiver creeps through my veins.

“This one looks like it’s got a story,” he chuckles.

“Nah.” I shrug and pull my arm away. “Just a bad tat.”

He smirks. “For real. I’d kill anyone who put that on me.”

My throat tightens. The chill in my blood turns to ice, flaying my veins open from the inside as I fight to stay in control.

To keep my head above water, and not drown.

“Ever thought about covering it up, or—”

“Maybe,” I mange to say through the tightness in my throat, willing him to change the subject.

To reach out and grab me, to stop me from falling into the abyss.

Mercifully he does, his attention shifting to the flowers on my other arm.

“And these?”

“Lilacs,” I answer.

His gaze raises to mine. “Because of…?”

“Jeff Buckley.”

Roman scowls deeply. “*Oh*,” he mutters.

I snort. “The fuck do you have against Jeff Buckley?”

“Nothing,” he grunts. “Just never gotten a tattoo about an ex.”

I laugh loudly. “I *wish*,” I chuckle. “Jeff Buckley, as in, the singer-guitarist? Famous for his cover of ‘Hallelujah’?”

When he gives me another blank look, I groan. “Holy shit, we need to fix this serious gap in your musical education. How the hell do you own every single Billy Joel record in existence but you’ve never even heard of Buckley?”

He rolls his eyes. “Okay, *fuck*.” He nods his chin at my tattoo again. “What’s with the lilacs?”

“‘Lilac Wine’ is another of his songs. I just…” I shrug. “Just love it.”

He smiles. “Play it for me sometime?”

“Count on it.” I meet his gaze. “What was your mom’s favorite Billy Joel tune?”

His mouth twists in a faraway smile. “Hang on.”

He turns and pulls a different album off the shelf before he walks over to the turntable. He puts the record on and turns the volume up before he walks back over to me as the piano notes begin to tinkle from the speakers.

“'Vienna'?” I grin widely. “That was your mom’s favorite Billy Joel song?”

He nods. “Yeah,” he murmurs. “She used to sing it to me when I was a kid and tell me about this trip she took to Vienna, before she met my father. She always said she wanted to take me there.”

He lifts his head, as if drinking in every note. My elbow brushes his as I slide to the floor, my back against the shelves. He joins me, and we sit there in silence, listening to the lyrics and the roll of the piano.

I wait until his mom’s song—which, by the way, I love; excellent taste, Mrs. Nikitin—ends and “Only the Good Die Young” starts before I turn to face him.

“You need to know something about tonight.”

He turns his head to look at me, then nods.

“I’m not going to go back to how it’s been,” I growl. “The hot and cold, the—”

“No, I know.”

“I need you to *really* know.” I lock eyes with him. “There’s two ways forward from tonight. One, this was the swan song. Good times were had, but we’re fucking *done*.”

Roman’s face pales as he shakes his head. “I—I don’t want that.”

“Good. Me neither. Door number two is, you and I are a couple.”

His lips twist into a wide grin. Then, of course, the fear sparks in his eyes.

“Val—”

“I’m not asking you to be suddenly out, Roman,” I say gently. “Not if you aren’t ready. I understand that your family and the Bratva makes it… complicated.” I put my hand on his knee. “I don’t need you to be my *out* boyfriend. But unless you pick door number one, you *are* going to be my boyfriend. That means we spend time together—even if we’re not fucking, though, honestly, I’m not sure how often we could spend time together *without* me fucking you.”

He grins, nodding his head.

“And it goes without saying, I hope, that option two also means you *do not* take slaggy cunts like Anna, or *any* fucking girl, out on dates,” I growl.

He nods, but then his brow furrows. “What about you?”

“Please,” I grin. “I’ve *never* dated an Anna. Jesus.”

He glares at me. “I'm serious. If we’re together—”

“If we’re together…” I growl, grabbing his jaw and twisting toward him. I lean closer, and he shivers when I suck his bottom lip between my teeth and nip it gently. “It means you’re *mine*, and I’m *yours*. That’s it.” I tighten my grip on his jaw as I level my eyes at him. “I don’t fucking share what’s mine.”

He grins. “Good. Neither do I. So I have a request, too. No more coed changing rooms at the theater.”

I snort, giving him a look. Then my brows shoot up. “Wait, you mean it?”

“*Yes*,” he growls. “I know all about how you get changed with the girls every so often.” His brow furrows deeply. “That ends.”

I roll my eyes. “Roman, they’re like sisters—”

“And I don’t want *my* sister, or any of them, to see you naked.”

I grin. “Is that to protect their delicate sensitivities, or—”

“Nope. Pure, undiluted *jealousy*,” he mutters, elbowing me. “Happy?”

“Immensely,” I grin, leaning in to kiss him.

He bites his lip as I pull away. “So,” he says slowly. “That's the deal for door number two? We spend time together, we’re dating, even if I…you know.”

“Are still in the closet, yes.”

He makes a face. I grin as I cup his cheek. “Don’t worry, wreckage, I get it. It’s cozy in there. I’ll come visit you and bring snacks.”

He smiles as he turns to kiss my hand. “Okay. I think I can work with that—”

“There’s one more thing.”

And it’s a fuckin’ doozy…

He frowns, bringing the drink in his hand to his lips. I reach for it, closing my hand around his wrist and stopping him. When he frowns in confusion and glances at me, I nod my chin at the glass.

“That stops.”

His brow knits. “What stops?”

“Your less-than-ideal relationship with alcohol.”

He starts to smile, like I’m kidding.

I’m not.

Half a second later, he realizes it too.

“Hang on,” he frowns, still half-smiling. “You’re serious?”

My mouth twists. “I don’t remember my childhood. But I know what addiction did to my parents, and to me and my brother. So, you want the sugar-coated version or the brutally honest one?”

Roman scowls. “I’m a big boy, Val,” he grunts. “I don’t need to be coddled.”

I shrug. “Okay, brutal honesty it is. Remember, I gave you the choice.” I look him dead in the eye. “You’re an alcoholic, Roman. Full stop.”

His face darkens, his brow furrowing as his jaw grinds. But he doesn’t try to insist I’m wrong, and that might be the most telling sign of all.

“I…” He shrugs. “I’m Russian, Val.”

“Don’t.”

He looks away. “It’s not a big deal. I just like to—”

“Drink,” I finish. “Daily. In large quantities.”

His mouth purses as his eyes stab into me. “Why are you making this into something?” he growls. “Why are you making this part of your fucking *conditions* for you and me to—”

“Because I like you, asshole,” I mutter, poking him in the chest. “I like you a lot more than I probably should. That means I care about your well-being. And I'm saying…” I shake my head. “It has to stop, man.”

His mouth sours. “And if I refuse?”

“Door number one it is,” I say flatly as I go to stand.

Roman’s hand shoots out, grabbing my wrist and yanking me back down. He exhales slowly, looking at the rocks glass in his hand, twisting it in the low light.

“How…” He swallows. “What you mean by *stop*.”

“You have a shitty relationship with alcohol, and I don’t see that ever changing because it doesn’t for literally *anyone* with an addiction to alcohol. So for your own health, and for *us*, I want you to stop.” I lock eyes with him. “Completely.”

Roman inhales slowly, looking at the glass in his hand again. “I’m not an alcoholic.”

“Prove it. You get to pick: booze, or me.”

Anger flashes in his eyes. “Fuck you, this isn’t fair.”

“Personal boundaries are perfectly fair,” I throw back. “Remember, I’m giving you a choice.”

Roman sets his glass down softly on the ground, lets go of it, and turns to me. He inhales and exhales slowly again, his throat working.

“It’s booze, or you?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

Roman suddenly grabs me, and before I know what’s happening, he’s kissing me hard even as he starts to tremble and shake.

Fuck.

“Hey,” I growl, wrapping my arms around him. “You’ve got this.”

“*I’m scared*,” he chokes, his breath hitching as his forehead presses to mine. “Val, I…I’m fucking *scared*. I…alcohol is my—”

“*I know*,” I whisper, holding him tight. “But I’m going to help you. I’m going to be there.” Our foreheads are still pressed together as I raise my eyes to his, cradling him. “I’ll always be there, wreckage.”

His body trembles again. Then he nods, exhaling slowly.

“I—I don’t know where to start—”

“You start with *me* becoming your new drug of choice,” I murmur.

He smiles weakly, his eyes misty as they lock with mine. “And after that?”

I smile as I pull him into my lap, letting his knees go to either side of my hips as I wrap my arms around him and hold him tight against me. “After that, wreckage, it’s one day at a time. And I’ll be there with you for every single one of them.”

He swallows, shaking as he takes another halting breath. Then his eyes lift to mine, and stay there.

“*Okay then*,” he whispers. “Door number two.”

“Buckle up, boyfriend,” I growl, searing my lips to his. “You’re fucking *mine* now.”

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ROMAN

IT STARTS WITH AGITATION. A mental itch I can’t scratch. A persistent whine in my head, like I’ve forgotten to do something.

At first, I think maybe I just didn’t sleep well. Or my vitamin levels are off. Or any other excuse I can come up with that doesn’t involve me fully acknowledging the obvious.

Doesn't involve me recognizing the cancer slithering through me that I’ve spent *years* pretending wasn’t there, while also feeding it. Nurturing it, leaning on it until I don’t know how to even walk without its support anymore.

But as the mask begins to drop, and that black hole inside that I’ve covered with smiles and “good times” begins to reveal its true malice and cruelty, the excuses shatter like glass.

It’s not my vitamin levels, or a bad night's sleep.

It’s that it's ten p.m., and I haven’t had a drink in twenty-four hours.

The world dulls around me as I prowl around my apartment, feeling as though reality has turned to molasses and I’m struggling to move through it. I snap at Val, then immediately feel like shit. I turn to him, face haggard, eyes pleading.

He just smiles.

“I’m here,” he murmurs, walking over to me. “I’m not going anywhere.”

But in my agitation, I shake him off and stalk back to my bedroom—then hate myself the instant the door slams shut between us.

By three a.m., the headache feels like a railroad spike being driven through my skull. My skin is clammy, and the sheets are soaked as I twist and turn, gritting my teeth and pushing my face into the pillow. I feel Val curl against me from behind, wrapping his arms around me—sweaty or not—and holding me tight. For a second, I bask in the calming sensation that brings me: slowing my heart rate and making the pain in my head abate just a little.

Then the tremors start an hour later, and that's when I truly realize how bad things are going to get.

The first full day was a chore.

The second day, as the withdrawal demons begin to dig their claws deeper into me, I realize I'm in *hell*.

A madness slides under my skin, clawing at my sanity as I writhe and twist in bed: a torturous punishment that squeezes my chest until I can't breathe, and then laughs in my face.

I yell to Val for a drink—just *one*, to take the edge off this nightmare. Even as I scream it again, twisting in the sweat-soaked sheets, I know how pathetic I sound. *Begging* for a drink. Near tears. Knowing damn well that the list of things I would do right now for a single glass of vodka is humiliating and beyond pathetic.

I also don't *care*, and find myself screaming for him again to bring me one.

He doesn't answer.

"*You said you weren't going anywhere!*" I choke, tears running down my cheeks as I squeeze my eyes shut and bury my face in my hands. "*Please!*"

The tremors start bad and just get worse. The hours drag by as I claw at my soaked sheets, clinging to them for dear life as the shakes try to break me in half. My teeth chatter, my muscles spasming and cramping viciously as the alcohol leaves my body in a scorched earth campaign, burning everything in its path.

I see my mother’s face—soft and sympathetic at first, then sneering and cold, disgusted with the man I’ve become, crying like a child just because I can’t have a fucking beer.

Evie’s face appears next, her head slowly shaking side to side as she mouths “what a weak brother. What a weak *boy*.”

After she goes, it’s my father’s face leering at me, sneering at my disgusting display and telling me what a disappointment I am.

How I’ll never lead the Bratva.

How no one would ever follow the leadership of someone so fucking *pathetic*.

The tremors get worse, until all I know is the agonizing pain of my muscles trying to rip themselves apart.

At some point, Val returns; holding me tight, telling me he’s there for me, that this is all eventually going to be okay. Holding my face to his chest as I sob like a fucking baby, torn between the desire for a drink and the desire to just die.

When the demons start raging inside me, and there’s no holding them back, I find myself lashing out at him, even though I hate myself when I do.

I tell him if he gave a shit about me, he’d get me a fucking drink. I tell him he’s the worst thing that ever happened to me. When he walks out of the room after that one, I collapse to the floor in a shaking, sweating, sobbing mess.

"Hell is empty, and all the devils are here."

I don’t sleep that night. Knowing it’s *only the second fucking night* makes it even more of a nightmare. Reality blurs in and out. Sometimes I’m in bed, twisting in the sheets and writhing in agony. Other times I’m on the floor, clinging to it, wondering if this could get any worse.

It can.

The third morning is when the vomiting starts—violent, unstoppable, gut-wrenching. The tremors are worse, too, and as the day creeps on, I start to

see colors drifting through my vision, and have full-on visual hallucinations. I also hear sounds that may or may not be there.

And the demons inside me *roar*.

Claw.

Bite.

Stabbing, slicing, screaming for a fucking *drop* of sweet relief.

I'm crying on the floor again, puking into the trashcan clutched to my chest, when firm, tattooed hands push my damp hair back from my face. Then they lift me, settling my head back onto warm, muscled thighs as they stroke my face.

"*You're going to be okay, wreckage*," Val murmurs as he holds me in his arms, rocking us back and forth as I cling to him and shake and sweat and puke.

I can see a second Val walking across the floor, though, looking at me with disdain, and I don't know if the one giving me comfort is real or not.

I don't even know if he's here.

Truthfully, I wouldn't blame him if he wasn't.

The Val giving me reproachful looks from across the room sneers at me and turns, grabbing Evelina in his arms. I shudder, crying pathetically for him to stop as he buries his face in her neck, making her moan as he pins her to the wall.

"*Stop it*!" I hear myself scream. "*Get the fuck away from her*!"

Hands still stroke my face. Strong thighs still shift under my head.

"*Stay with me, wreckage. Stay with me, Roman.*"

Right now, I don't care if he's real or just a detox hallucination, my consciousness fucking with me and punishing me.

I just cling to him with everything I have, crying, shaking, letting my veins bleed out poison as I beg for release, or death.

Please, don’t let me be like this.

I don’t want to be like this.

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VAL

BROOKLYN

Dude, are you okay??

BROOKLYN

1 day, I'm thinking hangover. 2, a BAD hangover. But missing four days of rehearsal in a row??? Srsly worried.

BROOKLYN

PS Kuzmina is going to murder you

I GRIN, shoving a hand through my hair and pushing it back from my face. The city hums and honks and clamors below me as I sit on Roman's veranda high above. Before I text Brooklyn back, my hand reflexively reaches for my cigarettes.

Goddammit.

It's day four of my own detox. If I was going to make Roman go through hell, I figured I might as well join him. Like, if my whole thing is making sure he doesn't die of cirrhosis of the liver, or heart failure, or whatever other horrible shit alcoholism can bring, then *I* can do my best not to die of lung cancer.

Also, if I'm going to be an agitated, edgy fuck, snapping at everything around me as I go through nicotine withdrawal, it might as well be at the same time that *he's* going through alcohol withdrawal.

We can be miserable, angry fuckers together, right?

I scowl as I pat my empty pocket, feeling the phantom bulk of a pack of cigarettes that isn't there.

I'll be honest, quitting *my* vice is nothing close to what Roman's been going through. Nicotine withdrawal makes you angry and short-tempered and a grumpy shit to be around, but that's it. After four or five days, the cravings are no longer physical, they're psychological. Also, I quit once before when I first started dancing professionally, so I knew what to expect.

Acute alcohol withdrawal, though, is a hell I don't ever want to experience. And after taking care of Roman these last few days, I'm not sure if it's something I'd survive.

In hindsight, I may have bitten off more than I was ready to chew when I decided he should quit drinking cold turkey. And after that first day and a half, when he started to get worse, and the tremors started, together with the hallucinations and the vomiting, I called a nurse friend of mine for help.

Carla used to date Miguel a few years ago, and I knew she would be discreet.

Luckily, after she took his vitals and got a rundown of his drinking history —well, to the best of my knowledge—she told me he was going to be okay here, and wouldn't have to go to the hospital.

I exhale, patting my empty pocket again as I glance out over the city. Earlier today was bad, but he's been dozing for the last few hours—and, for the first time in days, *not* screaming in terror while he's asleep.

That's gotta be a good sign?

Me: We talking hiring a hit squad or is Kuzmina going to go lone wolf on my ass and take me out from a grassy knoll

Brooklyn: I'm suggesting you avoid driving around in open-top cars for a while. Maybe stay away from windows in tall buildings, too. I mean, she's Russian.

Me: lol

Brooklyn: Seriously, what the fuck is going on with you?

I pause before I type a reply.

Me: Just had to deal with some stuff. I'll be back tomorrow, promise.

Brooklyn: Define stuff.

Me: I quit smoking

Brooklyn: !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Brooklyn: R u fucking serious?!? :D :D :D

I grin at the screen.

Me: Please don't hold back your thoughts regarding the situation

Brooklyn: I am SO PROUD OF YOU!!!

I smile, but then Roman's phone vibrates next to me. I turn to see a new text from Evelina.

Evie: Heeeeey!! Just wanted to check in on Mr. Sickypants! :(:(

Evie: How's the covid??

Yes, I've been using Roman's phone and pretending to be him to cover for what's really going on. No, I don't feel bad about it. As far as anyone who's texted him knows—Evelina, Bane, Laz, Nico Barone, and some cunt named Chloe who sent him a late-night nude and a "WYD?"—Roman is out with a bout of Covid.

Well, the first four are under that impression. Chloe got the first forty images that came up on Google when I searched for "very graphic roadkill", then got her naked ass blocked and her contact info deleted from his phone.

Me: Think I'm on the other side of it. Another few days and I'll be good.

Evie: U sure I can't bring u over some soup??

Me: I don't want you coming over here and catching anything. I'm good.

Me: UberEats FTW

Evie: OK! Well I'm thinking about you! Hope you're feeling better! :)

Evie: Oh and Stepan says hi.

Me: Hi Stepan.

Evie: Also…want to do dinner sometime after you're feeling better?

Me: I'd love that

Evie: Me 2! :)

Evie: Feel better!! Call anytime!

Me: Thanks girl

Evie: lol??

Fuck. I've lapsed into the way *I* text Evie.

Me: Sry, Covid brain. Going back to sleep now.

Then it's *my* phone dinging again. Jesus.

Brooklyn: So, you'll be at rehearsal tomorrow? Joking aside, missing five days would be bad.

Me: I know. I'll be there.

Me: Clingy much?

Brooklyn: Asshole :P

I finally put both phones down and sit back in the lounge chair, looking out over the city.

"*Hey*."

I whip my head around and then smile when my eyes land on him. Roman looks like *hell*, but I don't give a fuck.

"Hey."

I jump up from the lounger and walk over to where he’s leaning against the doorframe out to the veranda with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders, a haggard expression on his unshaven face. *Fuck*. The guy looks like he’s lost ten pounds. He's leaner, especially in his face and jawline, and when I wrap my arms around him, I feel a noticeable lack of padding over his muscles.

“How’re you feeling?” I murmur, letting him sink against me a little.

Roman snorts into my shoulder. “About as good as I probably look.”

“Well, you look fucking hot, so…”

He grins weakly as he pulls back, flashing me a half-smile.

“You hitting on me?”

“Duh.”

He grins again. “I don’t look hot. I look like shit, and we both know it.”

“Agree to disagree,” I grin. “You’ve got this delicious early 00’s Brad Pitt thing going on. Like, lean, dirty *Fight Club* Brad. Ooo, or greasy *Snatch* Brad.”

“All I heard was dirty and greasy.”

I chuckle, wrapping an arm around his back as I help him out onto the veranda. I guide him over to the lounge chair and sit down before I ease him between my spread thighs, his back to my chest as I wrap my arms around him.

“Do you need anything?” I ask gently.

He shakes his head. “Still no appetite. *None*.”

“Still, you should eat something.”

“Actually… I’d love a fucking cigarette.”

I make a face. “You…don’t smoke.”

“I know.”

“And you hate the smell of them.”

He sighs, twisting to look at me. “It just sounds… I dunno. Good right now?”

“No fucking kidding,” I grumble darkly.

He cocks a brow. “So, can I bum one?”

I shake my head. “No.”

Roman frowns. “I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

His frown deepens into a glare. “Look, I know you’re trying to help, but I can only deal with *one* denied vice at a fucking time. So *please*—”

“I literally *don’t have any*, Roman. Not anymore.”

He looks puzzled for a second, then blinks. “Wait, did you…?”

I nod.

“*Quit*,” I shrug. “Figured I’d join team healthy.”

A smile creeps over his face as he presses his forehead to mine. “I’m so proud of you,” he murmurs. “Really.”

“What can I say. You inspired me.”

“Val, I…” He closes his eyes. “*Thank you*.”

“You don’t have to thank me.”

“I think I do,” he murmurs. “Pretty sure it’s fair to say you saved my life.”

I smirk. “Oh my God, when did you become such a drama queen?”

He winces a little as he lifts a hand to flip me off.

“Seriously, though, how are you?” I frown as I cup his face.

“I…” He sighs and looks away. “I feel like shit. Like, actual shit.” He shakes his head before he drags his gaze back to me. “I…I don’t want to

ever do that again," he says quietly. "I don't think I *could*."

I nod, wrapping my arms around him a little tighter. He shifts, twisting in my arms and resting his face against my chest.

It occurs to me that I've never had this.

I mean, I've held people before. But I've never had actual intimacy. As I hold Roman, I'm not doing it just because I want to fuck him, or am counting down the seconds *after* fucking him until I can extricate myself from the situation and leave.

I'm holding him because I care about him. A lot.

I'm fucking crazy about him.

"I…" He swallows heavily, breathing against my chest. "I know this is just the first step…the last few days, I mean. I need therapy. Or AA. Something. Anything."

I nod. "Whatever you need, baby. I'll be there."

I don't realize he's crying until I feel the wet heat of his tears against my shirt.

"*I don't want to be like this*," he chokes.

"I know, wreckage," I murmur softly as I wrap him in my arms. "*I know*."

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ROMAN

I HAD my first drink when I was twelve—from my father, of course.

Vodka, of course.

Papa used to give me a little half glass of the stuff every night with dinner, to “toughen me up”. He said it was the Russian way, end of story.

I know if my mom had still been around, she wouldn’t have allowed it. But she was gone, and with her, any sense of comfort or peace in our house.

After she died, there was just Papa, his temper, and vodka.

By high school, I was having a drink before I sat down for my nightly one at the dinner table, and sometimes another after that too. High school is also when I discovered cocaine, ecstasy, Xanax, Adderall, lorazepam, Percocet, oxycodone, and anything else I could get my hands on.

But alcohol has always been my numbing agent of choice.

My one great love.

At Knightsblood, all bets were off. I mean, it’s *college*: drinking and debauchery are expected. So I partied, and then partied some more. Then kept on partying even after everyone else had gone home.

Somehow, that never really stopped. And now here I am, twenty-nine years old, looking down the barrel of the hell I just shook and cried and puked through.

I wasn’t being dramatic when I told him I was pretty sure he saved my life.

Because without specifically *him* asking me to stop, I doubt I ever would have. And there’s no end to the story I was writing before other than winding up dead before the age of forty.

I also know that this the fight doesn’t stop just because I’ve made it nine days without drinking.

This is just the beginning of beating that demon inside me, and that might be an even harder pill to swallow than the shakes and the puking a few days ago.

WHELDON

So what do you think?

I stare at the phone screen.

I think I fucking hate this and I want a goddamn drink.

But I’m not having one. Because I’m not weak. I’m not pathetic.

I am not controlled by the darkness inside me.

ME

Yeah, I’ll be there. 8 tonight at Assumption Church on West 33rd?

WHELDON

You got it

Guess I’m going to AA.

Wheldon, the forty-seven-year-old realtor, cold-plunge enthusiast, and father of two, leads a men’s meeting on Tuesday nights. He also just became my sponsor.

WHELDON

Listen, where you are right now is the hard part. But it’s also the easiest. All you have to do is keep moving forward. You’re stronger than you think. And you’re gonna love the guys. It’s a real good group.

I swallow, smiling wryly.

ME

Does it get easier?

WHELDON

Yes. But it gets harder, too. It's one day at a time, man.

I glance over the AA PDF he's already emailed over, and my mouth twists.

ME

There's a lot of God in AA, huh?

WHELDON

It's up to you. Does the big guy's name pop up a lot in the original Twelve Traditions? Yeah. But it's not mandatory to your recovery.

ME

I'm not religious at all.

Maybe I used to be. But I think I lost that when I lost my mom.

WHELDON

All good, Roman. I'm a complete atheist. Some of the guys are real into the religious aspect, some aren't. We've got a Catholic priest in the mix as well as a self-described Wiccan Warlock.

I smile. Then one of the questions I've been avoiding swims to the surface.

ME

How well does AA work?

WHELDON

Honestly, it depends on the person.

ME

What's the relapse rate?

WHELDON

90%

Fuck.

My heart drops as I stare at the screen. I only have a ten percent chance of not drinking again. Those odds *suck*.

WHELDON

What helps the most, beyond group meetings, is having someone in your life. You got good family, or a girlfriend/boyfriend/whatever?

Evie's face swims into my consciousness, together with Val's.

ME

Yeah.

WHELDON

Then you got this, brother. You're going to get through it. See you at group?

ME

Yeah. Thanks, man.

I sink back in my chair, that abysmal success rate pressing on my chest.

Ten fucking percent. If I'm lucky.

The door to my penthouse opens, and I smile when I see Val walking in, dance bag slung over his shoulder.

"Hey, gorgeous," he grins.

Goddammit.

I love when he says that to me. I just hate the way it makes me blush like a fucking teenage girl.

"Hey yourself," I smile. I stand as he walks over, dropping his bag along the way before wrapping his arms around me. He kisses me, and I melt a little.

"How was today?"

"*Way* better now," I grin. "How was rehearsal?"

"Stalin was in excellent spirits today. I was only banished to the gulag twice and faced one firing squad."

I chuckle. I've met Madame Kuzmina a handful of times. The woman is *terrifying*.

Val steps back, smiling as his gaze drags over me.

“What?” I mumble.

“You look *good*. And not just in an *I want to fuck you* way. I mean you legit look a lot healthier. Your color is coming back.”

“I *feel* better. Just…” I glance around.

“Feeling trapped?”

That's one word for it. I haven’t left the apartment in ten days.

“That and…antsy. Too full of energy. I haven’t worked out or run or anything in almost two weeks.”

Val’s lips curl. “Well… What are you doing now?”

Fuck. Part of why I haven’t left the house in ten days is because I’m not sure I *trust myself* not step into the first liquor store or bar that I see.

But I can’t stay here forever.

“What did you have in mind?”

He grins. “You still a member at that fancy gym?”

* * *

Fuck. *Yes*.

I groan, relishing in the pump of blood through my muscles as I push up, lifting the plate-laden barbell off my chest. I let it settle back down, then grunt as I lift it again.

Holy *fuck*, does it feel good to be working out. Plus, here at Equilibrium, there's no temptation like if we went out to eat or something. Here, it’s just me and my muscles, being used for the first time in almost two weeks.

I grunt, getting the final two reps off before I rack the barbell. I exhale and sit up, turning to see Val just about finishing up his set over at the squat

rack.

My eyes drop to his ass as he lowers into the squat. I grit my teeth, biting back a groan as my cock thickens.

Alcohol isn't the only thing I haven’t had in ten days.

Wild how puking, shaking, and crying on the floor can kill the mood.

I stand from the bench. Just then, I feel a presence behind me.

“Hey man, are you—wait, *Roman*?”

I turn, trying to place the tall, built guy with sleeve tattoos in front of me.

He smiles. “We, uh… We’ve fought before.”

Then it hits me. We’ve fought before *in a ring*, at the underground fight club.

“Lukas,” he grins, sticking out a hand.

“Lukas Komarov, of course,” I chuckle, gripping his hand firmly and shaking it. “Good to see you, man.”

We vaguely know each other, at least *of* each other, outside the fight club, too. Lukas’s father Viktor helms the Kashenko Bratva, which has a seat on the Bratva High Council—another Bratva “governing body” similar to the Iron Table on which my father sits.

“How’ve you been?” I shake my head. “I haven’t been to a fight in a while.”

Lukas rolls his eyes. “Me neither.” He lifts his shoulders. “Kids, man,” he chuckles. “Two of them. They're the best, but… They keep me pretty busy.”

I smile. “Yeah, I bet.”

He nods past me at the bench. “Hey, are you wrapped up here?”

I glance over to Val on the other side of the gym.

“Not quite. My boyfriend has one more set.”

The world fucking stops turning as the word falls out of my mouth. For a second, I'm so stunned that it feels like I'm going to throw up. I turn to Lukas again, expecting…I don't even know.

Cruel amusement? Disgust? To be mocked?

But none of that happens.

"No problem, man," he grins. Then he glances at his watch. "Shit, you know what, I gotta run anyway."

He looks up at me again, not a single drop of disdain in his eyes as he sticks his hand out. I'm still numb as I shake it. The *fuck* just happened?

"Good to see you, Roman. Hope we can rematch at the fights, yeah?"

"Uh…yeah. Sounds good."

I'm still standing there like an idiot when a hand lands heavily on my shoulder.

"Who the fuck was that?" Val growls, scowling at Lukas's back.

"That was…" A weird smile creeps over my face. "I think the first person I came out to besides you."

I frown as I suddenly pull out my phone.

Now that it's out there, I don't even care that I just kind of came out to the guy. But there's someone else I should have told *first*.

I tap on the text convo with Evie that Val, bless him, continued as me when I was out of commission.

Me: hey

Evie: Hi hi! :)

Me: Got plans tonight? We could do that dinner?

Evie: No plans! And YAY! :D

Evie: Would it be lame to have it at the house? I've got some stuff I need to do here tonight.

Evie: Papa's in Chicago on business, btw ;)

I grin.

Me: In that case, definitely.

Evie: <3 <3 Can’t wait!

Me: Mind if I bring a guest?

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ROMAN

“WAIT, I’m still trying to figure this out.”

Evie pauses, turning to open the oven and reach in with potholders to pull out an *amazing* smelling quiche. My stomach groans, and my mouth starts salivating like it hasn’t in two weeks.

My appetite has *sort of* come back. But I think it’s at this very moment, smelling real, home-cooked food, that it finally makes its triumphant return.

“Evie, that smells fucking *delicious*.”

She grins as she stands, puts the dish on the stovetop, and closes the oven door. Julia, Papa's full-time cook, is always more than happy to prepare anything you could want, anytime. But my sister said she wanted to cook tonight.

“Where did you even learn to make quiche? And *when*?”

She rolls her eyes. “I *do* have a life outside ballet, you know.”

Val snorts next to me at the kitchen island. “I would *love* to know how you manage that.”

She smirks. “*Not* being on Madame Kuzmina’s naughty list goes a long way.”

I chuckle as Val scowls. “Well, shit. I’m screwed, then.”

Behind the island, I reach over and squeeze his hand.

Evie starts to cut slices of the quiche, putting them on plates alongside the walnut and pear salad. Then she stops, glancing up at us again. “I got sidetracked. So… You guys both started going to the same gym?”

I smile. “Yep.”

I mean, it’s not a lie.

She smiles weirdly at me. “It’s just… I had no idea you guys hung out?”

“Oh, we do,” Val grins. His hand slides over to my lap and cups my dick. I shoot him a look and push his hand back to my thigh.

“He’s been helping me with my PT after the bike crash,” Val shrugs.

She turns and smiles at me. “That’s so nice of you, Roman! Oh!” Evie’s sliding our plates across to us when her brows shoot up. “I forgot the wine!”

She turns and reaches for an unopened bottle sitting next to the stove.

My vision tunnels as my gaze lands on it.

My blood turns icy, and I can feel the demons raging, so. Fucking. THIRSTY.

Val’s hand takes mine and squeezes. Not hard, like a reprimand. Just a reminder that he’s there.

“I’m actually good with water. But thanks, Evie.”

My sister’s face is pure shock as she whips around. “Sorry, *what*?”

“I’m all set,” I croak through a tight throat. “Water is fine.”

She blinks. “*You*…”

“You wanna sit, Eves?” I smile. “I have something to tell you. Well, two things.”

Val turns to cock a brow at me.

Yeah, we…didn't explicitly talk about what tonight was about. I mean, I brought him to dinner with my sister, and we talked about how that would

look. But nothing else was discussed past that. I think we both knew that I wasn't sure what I wanted to do yet, or how.

Evelina smiles curiously as she sits in one of the bar stools across the island. "Sure, Rome."

I take a deep breath and then exhale slowly.

"I'm an alcoholic."

The kitchen goes pin-drop silent. My sister blinks at me, her mouth opening, but no words coming out.

"I…yeah." I clear my throat. "I have a problem with alcohol, and I've decided that I'm not capable of having a good relationship with it. So I'm just…" I frown. "Not going to drink anymore. At all."

Slowly, her face lights up, and before I know it, she's jumping out of her seat and rushing around the island to crash into me. She hugs me fiercely and I hug her back, exhaling the last of the reluctance I had to share this with her.

"Whatever you need," she chokes, squeezing me tight. "I'm here." She pulls back a little, her eyes shining as she smiles up at me. "I'm so proud of you, Rome. And I love you, no matter what."

"I love you too, Evie."

She releases me with a choked little laugh, wiping at her eyes. "Well, no wine, then," she says firmly, marching over to the bottle.

"Don't let me stop you."

She snorts and glances over her shoulder at me. "Yeah, because me getting wasted on half a glass of Pinot Grigio is what everyone needs tonight."

Val hoots a laugh. "Your words girl, not mine."

"Jerk," she giggles. She plucks the bottle off the counter and crosses to the fridge. "So," she laughs over her shoulder as she opens the fridge and slides the bottle onto a shelf, "what else could you *possibly* have to tell me that's as important as that?"

“The fact that I’m gay.”

Evie goes still. The kitchen goes still. The whole fucking *world* goes still. I can feel my heart thudding against my chest as I try to swallow. Val turns slowly to me, his brows arched and his mouth open.

My sister slowly turns. And when she does, and her eyes land on mine, they go wide and shining, her mouth agape.

“ROMAN!!”

Then she’s slamming the fridge shut and rushing over to me. I grab her in my arms, hugging her tight and choking into her hair as she starts to cry.

“What are *you* getting emotional for?” I blurt.

“*I’m just so fucking happy for you*!” she chokes out.

Val bursts out laughing. “Jesus, she actually said the *F word*.”

Evie giggles. “Oh my God, I did!” She pulls back, her eyes full of happy tears as she beams at me. “Roman, I…I just…” Somehow, her smile grows even bigger. “*When*?! How!? Who—”

I watch as it clicks into place. She blinks at me, her eyes going round as saucers before her head slowly swivels to Val.

“Are you…”

I smile as I cup her cheek and turn her back to face me. My chin tips up and down as I start to smile.

“*Yeah*.”

“WHAT?!” She explodes in a flurry of pink cardigan as she shoves past me and flings her arms around Val. “Are you ACTUALLY SERIOUS RIGHT NOW!?”

“Serious as a heart attack,” Val chuckles, hugging her back. “Surprise?” He looks over her shoulder at me. “*Seriously*, surprise.”

Evie flings an arm back around me and yanks me close to hug us both.

“I don’t even know what to say!!” she squeals. “I’m just *SO* freaking happy!!”

“Evelina!”

The sound of my father’s voice booming into the kitchen is like a gun going off. The three of us jolt, whirling to stare at the man swaying in the doorway.

“So much fucking yelling to welcome me back from Chicago!” Papa growls, slumping against the door frame.

He’s obviously *wasted*, his eyes bleary, and his brows pinch as he looks at me, then Evie, then at Val.

“What is your fairy friend doing here?”

My stool pushes back across the floor as I stand abruptly.

“Apologize, Papa.”

Evie’s head swivels, her face turning white and her eyes horrified when the word falls from my mouth. I’m even aware of Val looking at me with a “what the fuck” look on his face.

And Papa?

He reacts exactly as you’d expect.

Drunk or not, in half a second, he’s lurching violently across the kitchen toward me. Evie screams as he grabs me, shoves me back against the island and leers up into my face, his vodka breath washing over me.

“*What the fuck did you say to*—”

“Wait!” Val barks. “Mr. Nikitin—”

“No one is talking to you, sissy boy!!” Papa roars back at him. “Sit your prancing, twinkletoes ass down and shut—”

“*APOLOGIZE!!*”

My voice booms through the kitchen, stunning even my father to silence. He blinks, his alcohol-soaked eyes swimming as he tries to focus on me.

“Such fucking disrespect,” he hisses. “In my own house!”

“The true disrespect is in talking to a guest like that, Papa,” I snap tightly.

“He’s here with me, Papa,” Evie stammers. “I—I made dinner and invited him. And—”

“Why the fuck are you *cooking,* Evelina?” Papa snarls. “We have someone who fucking does that! Where is she!?”

“Papa, I—”

“Why the fuck are you inviting pansies over for dinner, eh?” He jams a finger into Val’s face, laughing coldly. “Little Evelina, looking for a boyfriend?” He makes a tut-tut sound. “This one is *gay*, Evelina! He doesn’t want you! He wants boys!”

My lips curl.

“You’re barking up the wrong tree there, Evelina,” Papa chortles. He starts to laugh even louder, until suddenly, I snap.

I *relish* the look on his face when I grab him by the collar, spin him around, and slam him into the cabinets at his back.

“You don’t get to fucking talk to him like that!” I snarl into his face. “Now *apologize*—”

Papa’s eyes suddenly sharpen as he peers into my face.

“Why are you defending this fruit, eh, Roman?” he snaps. “What is this disrespect, as if I just insulted your fucking *girlfriend*?”

Blood roars in my ears. My teeth grind as I breathe through my nose, in and out, my skin tingling.

“Because, Papa,” I growl tightly, the roaring in my ears turning into deafening thunder. “He’s—”

“Because your son is a good man, Mr. Nikitin.”

Val shoves next to me and claps me on the shoulder like we're gym bros.

"And you're right," Val shrugs. "This is your house, and I should have asked your permission to be here."

I whip around to stare at him. Val gives my ankle a swift kick as he grins a winning smile at my father.

"My apologies, Mr. Nikitin. I came over to chat to Evie about my boyfriend." He smiles broadly. "You know, *girl talk* about boys."

Papa makes a stifled snort, wrinkling his nose.

Val is all smiles as he claps my father on the shoulder. "You've raised a good son, sir. He'll make an excellent *pakhan* one day."

Papa snorts, glancing at me. "*Da*, maybe. If he stops losing his fucking brides."

"Her loss, I guess," Val smiles widely.

The steam stops coming from my father's ears. He grunts as he turns and walks away. "I need a goddamn drink," he mutters, almost to himself.

"Can I help you upstairs, Papa?" Evie says brightly, coming to his side.

"*Da*, princess," he grumbles. "Get your Papa to his vodka and his bed." He pats her hand. "Don't worry. We'll find you a nice boy who likes *girls*, eh?"

"Of course, Papa," Evie smiles, taking his arm and leading him out of the kitchen. At the doorway, she glances back and mouths "I love you" to Val and me, grinning broadly.

"What was that?" I growl, turning to Val once Evie and my father are gone. "I didn't need to be saved. I had that completely under control. You don't know him—"

"That, wreckage," he murmurs, leaning close and brushing my lips with his. "Was me not being able to watch you blow yourself up."

I smile wryly.

“Look, I get that coming out is different for me than for you,” he says. “When I did it, it just meant getting picked on, maybe having to win a few more fights. But you’re the future king of a fucking empire.” He shrugs. “I get it.”

“You don't need to remind me what I am,” I whisper, locking eyes with him.

“I know, baby,” he smiles warmly. “For the record, you jumping up to save my honor or whatever the fuck that was…*hella* chivalrous.” He winks. “And fucking hot.” He kisses me softly. “But you don’t need to burn down your life and your future to do that—well, not tonight, at least,” he shrugs.

My lips twist.

“For real,” he growls against my mouth. “*Seriously* fucking hot.”

I groan as he rolls his hips, letting me feel his erection against my thigh.

“*How hot*,” I murmur, my pulse speeding up as my own dick begins to swell.

“So hot that I need to fuck you in your homophobic father’s house, like, now.”

I groan as I grab the back of his head and crush my lips to his. “His office, down the hall,” I breathe. “*Huge* desk.”

“Lead the fucking way, wreckage.”

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VAL

TODAY IS A BIG DAY.

I grin as I reach for Roman's fancy shampoo that he orders from France; the one that's got—I shit you not—honey from "heritage apiaries" outside Lyon and, like, Alpine frost water or something in it.

I've come to realize that Roman is a fancy, bougie little bitch like that.

And *I'm* the one who's been openly queer since I was fourteen.

Today is not a big day because I've finally decided I'm fine using Roman's nine-hundred-dollar shampoo—I mean, fucking *seriously*—to wash my hair *and* my balls.

It's because today is Roman's official "coming out" party.

It's a select group. "Coming out" doesn't have to mean buying billboard space in Times Square. And there are still no plans to mention it to Pavel, regressive homophobic douchebag that he is. No, today is for our close friends, who only know that they've been asked to Roman's penthouse for "an announcement".

Telling Evie seems to have opened the floodgates of him wanting to tell the people he cares about who he truly is.

Bougie shampoo and dickhead fathers notwithstanding, that's amazing. I'm happy for him.

I’m happy for *us*.

I grin to myself as I duck under the rain-head shower.

“Us” has a certain ring to it that I fucking like.

A *lot*.

Because I’m crazy about this fucking guy, of course, but also, because “us” isn’t something I ever thought I’d find. Or even *wanted* to find.

Water trickles down my body, and for a second, it feels like it lingers, tingling, in that one space on my arm covered in chaos and madness.

You will never be happy.

You will never be loved.

I flinch, a mini lightning-storm flashing and ricocheting through my skull. Then I grit my teeth and slam both fists to the shower wall, focusing on goodness.

On love.

On *Roman*.

The storm passes and I exhale, sputtering flecks of water against the wall.

We’ve got almost an hour before people start arriving, and as I step out of the shower and dry off, I feel heat flicker through me.

Today already started off fantastically: Roman woke me up with his mouth around my cock, which soon turned into me fucking him into the bed until he sprayed his cum all over both of us as I came deep inside him.

Like I said: *fantastically*.

But this man makes me a horny motherfucker. I mean, I already was. But Roman is like steroids for my libido. His scent. His body. His eyes. That fucking *gorgeous* dick.

I groan as my cock thickens between my legs, then grin devilishly to myself.

We *do* have an hour…

I wrap a towel around my hips and grab a second one for my wet hair as I walk out of the bathroom into his bedroom. I throw the towel over my head as I pad out of his room and head for the sweeping staircase down to the main floor.

“Where are you, gorgeous,” I growl, toweling my hair and keeping an eye on my feet as I hurry down the steps. “I want those perfect lips wrapped around my cock, and then I want fuck you on the veranda in broad dayli—”

“*For fuck’s sake*.”

It’s not just his gruff voice that stops me cold. It’s the barely stifled, female giggle that accompanies it.

I yank the towel off my head, and swallow when I see Roman…

And *Brooklyn*.

“I…uh…” she stammers.

“She came over early,” Roman growls, glaring at me, “to help set up for the *surprise announcement party*.”

I grin, shoving my hair back and turning to Brooklyn. “So…spoiler alert?”

“YOU GUYS!!”

I flinch at the shrill shriek that rips from her throat. She whirls and throws her arms around Roman, hugging him tightly and screaming over and over —which, thankfully, manages to wipe the glare off his face as he grins, hugging her back.

“Why didn’t you tell me?!” she blurts.

He glances at me, his face flushed and that goddamn beautiful smile on his lips. Then he turns back to her.

“I didn’t know how to tell myself,” he growls.

She squeals and hugs him again before she spins and marches over to me.

“And *you*,” she grins as she throws her arms around me. “*Is this real*?” she whispers fiercely into my ear as she hugs me. “I mean *really*—”

“Yeah, B,” I whisper back. “It is.”

She pulls away and sticks a finger in my face. “If you pull any bullshit with—”

“Thanks so much for the vote of confidence, *friend*,” I mutter as she giggles and hugs me again.

“Hey, when one of my friends falls for another one...” She shrugs. “It needs to be said.”

“Then say it to *him*, too,” I grunt, smirking as she turns to wave a finger dramatically in Roman’s face.

He smiles and looks up at me. “Could you *please* put on some fucking pants before everyone gets here?”

* * *

THEY'RE ALL HERE: Evie, Dove, Brooklyn and Kir, Carmine and Lyra, Nico and Naomi, Nero and Milena, Tate, Miguel, James, Laz, and Bane.

Surprisingly, even my brother showed up.

“You *did* invite me,” he says in that slightly *too* direct way of his.

“Yeah, but…”

“You didn’t think I’d come.”

“Not really.” I frown as I step close to him, tapping my finger to his chest. “For the record, my threat from before still—”

“I’m not going to use Roman, or you *and* Roman, or anything about this situation in any sort of Machiavellian chess move,” he says dryly. “I promise.”

I nod stiffly. “Well…okay then.” I grin as I sling an arm over his shoulder. “Thanks for putting the psycho evil villain routine on hold for the evening.” I turn to him. “I really *am* glad you’re here.”

Leave it to Roman, closet case extraordinaire, to come out in the *gayest* way possible. I mean, the man *throws a fancy party*, asks his guests to “dress up”, then calls their attention by tapping a teaspoon against his flute of fizzy apple juice.

I mean, the *bougieness*.

I can only get so fucking hard, you know?

But then he tells them—not haltingly, not awkwardly. He stands tall and proud, facing his close friends, and tells them the truth.

“I’m gay.”

There’s a moment of frozen silence, then everyone starts to clap and whistle and cheer all at once. I watch as Roman’s face lights the fuck up, his shoulders pulled back, his chest puffed out, as he faces them all unhidden for the first time.

Then he calls me over, takes my hand, and finishes his announcement.

Yeah, that’s me. I’m part two of the announcement.

After that, it’s one big blur.

All my ballet girls are rushing up to hug me or warn me with a laugh what I can expect to happen if I fuck Roman over. But that’s nothing compared to the psycho shit I get from *his* friends.

Carmine tells me I’ve “garnered his attention”, which is just as creepy to hear in person as it sounds, trust me.

Nico congratulates me but then shows me the hunting knife that—for some fucked-up reason that truly escapes me—he brought strapped to the inside of his dinner jacket.

Bane starts to ramble on about how bodies can be disintegrated in a plastic oil barrel with the right kind of acid. Laz inquires if I have a high pain

tolerance. Nero just plainly tells me he'll cut my throat if I dick over his buddy.

Fun times. Solid memories.

But in the end, when they see the way he never leaves my side, and the way I never leave his, and how our hands stay locked together, the threats turn to firm handshakes and claps on the back.

Finally, long after midnight, the last of our friends have gone home, and it's just the two of us.

It might not be daylight anymore, but I *do* fuck him out on the veranda, watching him ride my cock until he groans and slams his mouth to mine, kissing me as his hot cum sprays all over my abs. I hiss into his lips, biting and sucking as I follow him over the edge, my cock pulsing as I empty my balls into him.

The city hums below us as I sit back in the lounge chair, his back against my chest and my arms around his body. Roman's fingers lazily drag over my skin, sending incredible shivers down my spine as he strokes my arms.

Suddenly, his fingers go still.

"Can I ask you something?"

"*Anything*," I murmur, kissing the back of his neck.

Then I freeze when his finger touches the chaos on my arm.

"What is this?" he asks quietly. "Honestly."

For a second, I can't even speak, it's come out of nowhere so fast. I haven't had time to put on my armor or throw up my walls.

Roman twists in my arms. "Hey," he says gently, cupping my jaw. "Whatever it is—"

"It's nothing."

But he's not stupid, and he doesn't let it go that easily. It's one of the reasons I like him so much.

“It’s covering scars,” he murmurs quietly. “That’s why the lines are so chaotic, right? To obscure the—”

“How…” My throat works, my chest rising and falling rapidly. “I—”

“I’ve gotten pretty familiar with your body,” he says, his face heating. He leans close to me, touching his forehead to mine. “Whatever it is, you *can* tell me.”

“*What if I don’t want to*,” I rasp, tensing as the darkness begins to swirl and claw inside me.

“Why wouldn’t you?”

I look away.

Roman gently turns my face back to him. “You brought me out of a darkness that was going to fucking kill me,” he growls. “I want to—”

“No, you don’t,” I choke.

His lips touch my cheek.

“The thing is, baby,” he murmurs, his baritone voice humming though my chest and cracking the ice splintering around my heart. “I *do*.”

My eyes are glistening as I twist my face to look at him, my pulse thudding. “I—I’m worried you’ll—”

He silences me with a kiss as he holds me tightly.

“There’s nothing you could say that would make me adore you any less.”

Goddammit, this guy.

I start to cry, and I fucking *hate* crying.

Then it all comes out. I tell him about Connor, the twenty-something son of the foster mom I was placed with when I was thirteen. I tell him about Connor coming to my room at night.

About the touches that wouldn’t stop. The knife against my throat and the whispered threats of what would happen if I told anyone.

I go numb as I tell him about the touches turning to more.

About the garage behind the house.

About the rag in my mouth that I screamed into while he made me bleed, in more ways than one.

You will never be happy.

You will never be loved.

“Turn off the lights.”

My voice is leaden and dead. Roman is looking at me with pain in his eyes —not disgust, not second thoughts, just…pain.

We’re both completely silent as he switches the veranda lights off.

“Hand me that, please?”

I nod at the lit votive candle on the table next to us. When he passes it to me, as our fingers brush. I look up into his eyes, swallowing tightly.

I hold the candle near my skin, the flickering light casting shadows across the raised edges of the scars that the chaotic lines of my tattoo usually cover.

He frowns until suddenly, the light catches just right, and pain shatters his face when he sees it carved into my flesh.

F-A-G.

“*Where is he*.”

He whispers the words. But there’s such bone-crawling icy deadness in the whisper that it sends shivers down my spine.

He stares at my skin, his jaw clenched so tight that a vein throbs in his temple.

“*Where. The fuck. Is—*”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care anymore,” I choke, pressing my forehead to his. “What happened, happened.” I shake my head. “It’s not why I’m bi. It’s

not why I get off on taking away your control."

"I wouldn't ever think—"

"It's probably why I slept around so much," I hiss, shaking as I realize that I've just shared this…this *thing* inside me with another soul for the very first time. "It's definitely why I never had a real, lasting relationship. "

"*Val*," he chokes, wrapping his hand around the back of my neck as we press our foreheads together.

"It's why I never looked for love. I knew I was never going to find it."

"You—"

"*Until you*, *wreckage*," I whisper, shaking, tears running down my face as I grab him by the back of the neck and hold him tightly. "I knew I was never going to find love until I met *you*. And wreckage," I choke, trembling as I pull him into my lap, "I fucking love you so much it hurts."

"*I love you, too*."

The words fall like a prayer against my lips before we crash together.

And for the first time in my life, I don't feel the need to keep moving. At all.

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ROMAN

I EXHALE SLOWLY as I look up into the chilly autumn night, lower Manhattan buzzing around me. Behind me, the door to the nondescript building shuts with a soft click. I pull my jacket around my shoulders a little more tightly.

This plain, boring building acts as one of several entrances to the underground space that houses the Black Court, which has just adjourned for the night after a trial. The guilty tonight chose “flight” through the maze, which gave Nero one of his psycho boners. Fuck, he loves the thrill of the hunt.

But it’s not anything about the trial or the chase this evening that has me fighting to control my breathing and keep my pulse in check.

It’s that this was the first Black Court session since I officially quit drinking six weeks ago. Of course, the guys have all rallied behind me, to the point of unanimously suggesting that the pre-parties no longer have alcohol available. I put the brakes on that.

I don’t need to be coddled. I don’t want kid gloves or safety railings. Because the world isn’t going to give me those. The world is going to continue to scream at me to *drink drink drink*, because it’s cool, sexy, and will cure all my problems.

That’s just the way it is.

So, no; while I appreciate the way my friends have shown they're happy to help me with my sobriety, I don't need their assistance. Which means tonight was my first foray back into a social situation with alcohol flowing freely around me.

And I was…okay.

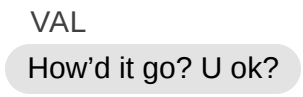
Not great. Not perfect. I'd be a lying piece of shit if I said I didn't catch the scent of whiskey at some point and fucking *want* a goddamn drink so bad I would have killed for it.

But I didn't take it.

I stayed in control.

This demon inside *will not fucking kill me*.

I grin as I pull my muted phone out of my pocket and see the text waiting from Val.



Val doesn't know *all* the details of what I was doing tonight, just that it was "mafia-related", and that I was with the guys. I haven't told him about the Black Court yet.

That's a hard rule the five of us made at the beginning. The whole point is that when we're down there with our masks on, adjudicating the accused, we're not the heirs or leaders of the various families we belong to.

We're impartial, faceless judges of the shadows.

So right from the beginning we agreed that we'd never tell anyone—not good buddies or best friends, not girlfriends, nobody. We've amended that over the last year to make exceptions for relationships that are clearly for life. Lyra, for example, as Carmine's wife, knows. So do Milena and Naomi.

I want to tell Val. I want to tell him every fucking detail about me. I want to open my life up to him and let him peek around inside. But the Court?

I don’t know if we’re there yet. Close. But I don’t know, and I have to be certain before I share this part of me.

ME
OMG, I’m wasted. So drunk. Barf. Puke. Tequila shots.

VAL
That’s not even funny, dickhead.

ME
LOL, it’s a little funny?

ME
No, it went fine. I mean, yeah, I was tempted. But I was okay.

VAL
I’m really fucking proud of you. Seriously. You amaze me, wreckage.

I grin, feeling my face throb with heat.

ME
Couldn’t be doing any of it without you.

ME
I love you

VAL
Love you too

I grin wider, rolling my eyes at myself as I close the phone and slip it into my pocket.

“Yeah, he can have that effect on people.”

I whirl, startling as Vaughn Bancroft slips quietly from the shadows.

Jesus, it’s spooky how similar he and Val look. I mean, not twin level, but it’s *real* fucking close. The exact same facial bone structure. Same eyes. Same build. They even have similar tattoos on their necks. The only differences seem to be that Vaughn’s forearms and hands are totally bare of ink, and I can’t picture Val in a Bond-villain style three-piece suit, which is Vaughn’s go-to.

Val hasn’t told me a lot about his brother and their relationship. But he’s told me enough that I know Vaughn is a goddamn psychopath, and I *really* don’t like the way he clearly uses Val’s need for love and family to his advantage.

“At least, I *assume* the smile and vague flush in your face are due to my brother,” he says with a smug smirk.

My hands close to fists as I take a step toward him. But Vaughn just shakes his head and holds his hands up, palms facing toward me.

“I know you think otherwise, Roman, but I really didn’t have anything to do with the firebombing of your father’s safe house.”

My eyes narrow. “You’ll forgive my skepticism.”

He shrugs casually. “Would it ease your mind if I showed you concrete proof that neither I nor the Obsidian Syndicate was involved?”

“I think I’m wondering why, if you had proof that you had nothing to do with almost killing my father, you wouldn’t have shown it to me before.”

Vaughn smiles flatly. “Perhaps, Roman, it’s because I’m simply *unbothered* about your thoughts either way.”

My jaw grinds. “Well? Let’s see it.”

He chuckles quietly. “That’s not actually why I’m here.”

“I can’t imagine what else we’d have to talk about,” I growl.

His brows arch. “No? Not even the fact that you’re sleeping with my brother?”

I know he knows about Val and me. He was *at* the party the other day, but it still feels like he’s throwing it out there like it’s leverage.

“Not, of course, that my brother discusses that with me.” He smiles cooly at me. “Oh don’t take that personally, by the way. I’m sure he’s very proud to be with—”

“Enough with the fucking head games, Vaughn,” I grunt. “*Yeah*, I’m with Val. Which you already know.”

“Congratulations.”

I smirk coldly. “That why you stalked me tonight? To dramatically emerge from the shadows and congratulate me for dating your brother?”

His head cocks to the side. “Why not? You wouldn’t stalk a man through the shadows to confront him if you were presented with evidence that he was sleeping with your sister, Evelina?”

My eyes darken. “If you’re smart, you won’t involve my sister’s name in any of this,” I growl.

Vaughn exhales. “Like it or not, Roman, your involvement with Val complicates a certain…*rivalry* between my organization and your own.”

“You mean trying to cozy up to Cosimo Sangrini.”

He smiles. “That’s no crime. I believe your family is doing the exact same thing. Or *was*, before you and my brother managed to scare off your fiancée.” He smirks at the dark look on my face. “Relax, Roman. I’m fully aware of your arrangement with Ms. Lukashova. She’s quite happy with Maks, by the way, if you were curious. I’m sure she sends her regards.”

I level a look at him. “Why are you *here*, Vaughn. I don’t for second think it’s to give me the ‘stern big brother’ talk regarding Val.”

Vaughn appraises me coolly, not saying anything immediately.

“You’re going to make a very good *pakhan*, Roman,” he finally says. He lifts a shoulder and cocks a brow. “Well, *could*. I’m not sure how progressive the Bratva is these days when it comes to an openly gay leader. You’d know better than me.”

This fucking guy and his head games.

“I’m leaving,” I mutter. “I’ll tell Val you said hi.”

I turn and start to walk away.

“That thing we both want, Roman?”

I pause mid-step, exhaling as I turn to look back at him.

“Sangrini’s ear and favor?” He shrugs. “It’s not going to happen, for either of us. For anyone. We’re chasing an impossibility. Cosimo Sangrini is *utterly* beyond corruption. The entire Sangrini family is, has been for centuries. It’s why they’ve remained the shadowy power they are.”

I smile crisply. “I’m sure the impossibility of him forming an allegiance with you is why you’re still throwing him lavish parties at your mansion in the mountains.”

Vaughn’s lips curl up at the corners. “That makes you angry?”

“It makes me doubt any of the bullshit that just came out of your mouth.”

Vaughn exhales slowly. “I’m going to tell you this because I believe sooner than later it will be you sitting on the Nikitin throne. And when you are, I think you and I could have a very mutually beneficial relationship.”

I snort. “You want to be allies—”

“No, I want us to have a *mutually beneficial relationship*. There’s a difference,” he says flatly.

I hold his gaze. “No promises. But…fine. What is it you wanted to tell me.”

“Simply that I’ve never had any hopes of currying favor with Cosimo Sangrini. But so long as your family *thought* I did…” He shrugs eloquently.

I stare at him. “You did all of that to—what, fuck with my family?”

“To shake the tree, Roman,” he growls. “And see which *pakhan* fell out.”

I laugh coldly. “And Val? You were totally fine with your own brother being an pawn in your little war games?”

“Whatever you think of me, Roman,” Vaughn growls, “I *love* my brother. I would do anything for him.”

A raging animal snarls inside me.

“Anything meaning leave him for dead while you escaped with the criminals who’d turned you into child drug traffickers? Anything like run off to your lavish life climbing the ranks of your little 'brotherhood' while

your *actual fucking brother* was thrown to the goddamn wolves in the foster system!?”

I’m seeing red. My fucking veins throb as I look at Vaughn with malice and fury in my eyes.

“*Fuck you*,” I snarl. “You left him! Do you have any fucking idea of the shit he had to go through, the monsters he had to fight, and—”

“I am aware, Roman,” Vaughn snaps, “of *every* pain and injustice that was thrown at my brother!” He barks a cold, brittle laugh. “You think I just forgot about him? No, Roman,” he hisses. “I was aware of *everything*, and it fucking ripped me apart. But I also know the Syndicate would have destroyed him.” He shakes his head. “He wouldn’t be anything like the man you’re so enamored with. Wouldn’t have found who he is or discovered ballet. None of it. The Val you love is who he is because he grew up in the lesser of two godawful evils! I made a choice,” he snarls. “I’d make the same choice again today if I had to.”

Yeah, we're done here.

“Well, this has been fun, Vaughn,” I grunt. “But I’m going home.”

I’m only a few steps away when my phone buzzes. I pull it out, looking curiously at the "unknown number" on the screen.

“Roman?” a young woman says when I answer. “It’s Freya.”

My pulse skips.

It was a month ago now that Val shared the darkest part of his past with me: *Connor*, the piece of shit motherfucker who abused and raped him when Val was only thirteen.

It broke me apart, hearing about the hell that he was dragged through as a fucking kid. And obviously, there isn’t a reality where I hear about that and don’t *do something* about it.

Something *violent*.

At first, Connor proved to be much harder to track than I expected. I had his back story—expulsion from two different high schools for sexual assault. A

brief stint in the Army before he got kicked out for *alleged* sexual assault. That's how he wound up back at home, living with his mom.

Preying on the foster kids she took in.

The mom—one Maggie Leary—died a few years back. Connor sold the house, moved to Virginia, and got work as a middle school janitor. Then, when he got put on probation for “allegedly” putting hidden cameras in bathrooms and locker rooms, he disappeared.

That’s where the trail ran cold—until I remembered Brooklyn telling me about Kir’s daughter, Freya.

Freya lives in Tokyo with her husband Mal, where they both work for the Mori-kai Yakuza family run by Mal’s cousin, Kenzo. She’s an *expert* hacker, and a freakishly good people finder. So I reached out to Kir, and he put me in touch with her a few weeks ago.

“Do you…” My mouth goes dry, and I struggle to swallow. “Did you—”

“Yup. Found him,” she says quietly.

She and Kir don’t know the details, just that the man I’m looking for is a piece of shit child molester and that I’m hunting him so I can *hurt him*.

Badly.

“You’re in luck,” she continues. “He’s in New York, up in the Hudson valley just north of the city.”

I’m shaking a little as I nod my head silently.

“He’s going by the name Ken Leary now. Texting you the address.”

“Thank you,” I croak.

She’s silent for a second before she clears her throat. “My dad told me what kind of monster the fucker is. Do me a favor. When you hurt him—I assume you *are* going to hurt him?”

“I am.”

“*Good,*” she hisses. “Do something real fucking gnarly for me, too, 'kay?”

I smile grimly. “Consider it done. Thank you, Freya.”

The text with the address comes through right after I hang up. I swallow, fishing around my pocket for my car keys before I suddenly pause.

“Vaughn!”

I catch up with him two blocks away, about to step into the back of a black Bentley. The three guards with him turn, their hands moving to their obvious sidearms before Vaughn waves them off, quietly shaking his head. He straightens his jacket and rolls his neck as he walks over to meet me.

“I *knew* we were having too much fun to simply—”

“What are you doing right now.”

His brow furrows. “Why.”

“Because there’s something I need to go do.” My jaw tightens. “And I think it might be something you need to do, too.”

* * *

CONNOR LEARY—AKA Ken—sobs and gurgles, spit and blood oozing from his mouth and dripping all over his bare chest as he shakes on his knees at the edge of the cliff.

“I believe he’s trying to say something, Roman,” Vaughn says thoughtfully, his eyes glinting with a quiet madness I fully understand. A bloodied blade twirls in his fingers as we look down at the sniveling, writhing piece of garbage at our feet with his hands tied behind his back.

“You know, I think he *is*,” I growl.

My fist slams into the side of Connor’s head, wrenching it to the side and sending him tumbling face-first into the dirt. I snarl as I grab a fistful of his greasy hair, yanking him back up to his knees.

“What was that, *Connor*?!” I roar in his face. “Spit it out!!”

Vaughn snickers next to me. “It might be lodged a bit too far down his throat for that.”

“Hmm, I think you might be right.”

We’re not talking about whatever the fuck he’s trying to say. What’s lodged in the back of his throat isn't words.

It’s his severed *dick*.

I punch Connor in the face again, sending him screaming around the flesh in his mouth as he goes crashing to the side, face-first into the dirt.

“Well, I bet he’s glad we took his teeth,” Vaughn says dryly. “He might’ve just bitten something that he doesn’t want bitten.”

People respond to pain, hatred, and vengeance in different ways. Nero, for example, lets his not-so-hidden psycho out to run *wild*. Vaughn, apparently, reacts with gallows humor and that icy smile.

But me?

I just see black and blood, and I want fucking *more*.

I turn and let my gaze drop to the hunting knife in Vaughn's hand.

“Be my guest,” he murmurs, handing it to me.

Connor sobs, trembling and spasming as I yank him by the hair to his knees. I drag him across the ground to a nearby rock and toss him face-down across it. I slam my knee into the small of his bare back, grabbing him by the nape of the neck and keeping him pinned to the stone as the knife glints in my hand.

Vaughn doesn’t blink or look away once, not even when the screaming turns wet and gurgled, or when I hit some artery or vein which violently sprays a geyser of blood across my face and over my shoulder.

I take my fucking *time* with each letter. Each word. Each part of what I carve into his back.

Rapist.

I fuck kids.

My name is Connor Leary, and I earned every bit of this.

“Stay the fuck with me, asshole,” I grunt, yanking him up by the hair again and punching him in the nose to snap him out of whatever dulled shock he looks to be fading into. “You don’t get to tune this out. You don’t get to escape.”

I drag him off the rock and then pull him up, angling his head back with his face to the sky as I loom over him and hand the gory knife to Vaughn.

“We’re not done yet.”

I let him scream as Vaughn carves another “rapist” into his forehead.

I take his eyes.

Vaughn relieves him of his nose and ears.

Then we both tie Connor’s feet to the waiting cinderblock at the edge of the cliff above the Hudson River.

Vaughn clears his throat delicately. “Pro tip—if you don’t puncture his abdomen, the body will eventually fill with gas and float.”

“M-hmm.” I tug the knots tight and toss the blade away.

Vaughn looks at me. “He’ll be *found*, Roman.”

“I’m counting on it.”

I squat down and punch Connor in the face again. “You're going to be famous, motherfucker,” I hiss.

Vaughn and I nod at each other. Then, without any fanfare, we use our feet to kick Connor to the edge and over it.

A gurgled choke.

A splash.

Then—silence.

* * *

“BEFORE WE PART WAYS.”

Back in the city, Vaughn pauses as he starts to open the passenger door of my car. Then he turns to level his gaze at me.

“I told you I had proof that I had no part in the bombing at your father’s safe house.”

He reaches into his inside jacket pocket and pulls out a little plastic bag with “NYPD EVIDENCE” stamped on the side of it. He hands it to me, and I frown at the rubberized, neon orange box inside with what looks like Chinese lettering on it, about the size of a pack of cigarettes. It’s blackened and scorched, with the display screen cracked.

“What am I looking at?”

“It’s a timer for a bomb.” He nods his chin at it. “Specifically, the timer of *that* bomb, at your father’s safe house. Chinese military tech, probably stolen or sold on the black market.” He clears his throat. “This isn’t easy to get your hands on, for the record. It’s rare to see it used outside of military use, and even rarer to see it used in the U.S.”

When I look up at him with a puzzled expression, Vaughan smiles darkly. “If *I* were trying to bomb your father and Nikolai Antonov, surely I’d simply use a remote detonator.” He points to the bag in my hand. “*That* is for setting an explosive charge to go off at a predetermined time.”

I frown deeply. “And?”

“*And*, even if I knew about your father’s secret safe house, and had gained access to it without anyone knowing, *how would I know when he’d be there*?”

Fuck.

I never thought of that.

Vaughn shrugs as he opens the door and steps out.

“Oh, and Roman?” He ducks his head back in.

“Yes?”

He smirks. “If I'd wanted to blow up your father, I *wouldn’t have missed*.”

He pats the roof of the car with his hand.

“Val’s lucky to have you, you know.”

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VAL

"WHERE ARE WE GOING?"

I glance over to the passenger seat of Roman's car, where he's currently sitting blindfolded. I groan a little as my dick thickens.

What can I say: the sight of this man bound, gagged, or blindfolded just… *does* things to me.

"You'll see."

He sighs. "Val—"

"It's a surprise! Fucking *obviously*!"

"I'm not a huge fan of surprises."

I roll my eyes. "God, I can't imagine what a grumpy, emo little fuck you were as a kid. You hated Christmas, didn't you?"

He laughs quietly. "Please. I loved Christmas."

"Even with all those fucking *surprises*, AKA presents?" I tease.

His brow furrows under the blindfold. "I just don't get why it has to be this big thing where you *know* you're getting something but you have to wait a whole week, looking at it all wrapped up. I mean, what's the point—"

"You will be visited by *three spirits*!" I crow in the best Dickensian tone I can muster. "The ghost of Christmas Past, where you'll see what a

miserable little shit you were at the age of nine. Christmas Present, where—”

“I get it,” he grunts tightly.

“Relax, wreckage,” I chuckle, making him flinch for a second when I reach over to pat his thigh. “You’re gonna love this surprise. It’ll change your whole perspective on them, actually.”

“*Big* fucking words,” he sighs.

“Please. You like it big.”

I grin as his face turns scarlet.

“Almost there, Scrooge,” I laugh as I merge into the right lane and take the next exit.

I’ve never been here, because why would I *ever* have driven most of the way across Long Island for anything before. But for him, and the look I know I’m going to see on his face, it’s worth it.

Fuck, *anything* is worth it for him.

I pull into the parking lot and turn off the engine.

“Keep it on,” I warn as I step out of the car and walk around to his side.

I help him out, then guide him across the road to the small, unassuming, but apparently *phenomenal* Austrian restaurant perched high above the rocky beach.

“Okay,” I grin as I step in front of him. “We’re here.”

I strip the blindfold off with a flourish and step to the side, my eyes glued to his face. He blinks, looking confused for a second before suddenly, his brows arch. His lips curl. Then I see that twinkle in his dark eyes that I love so much.

“It’s not Vienna-Vienna,” I shrug, turning to glance at the restaurant. “But it’s third-generation family owned, and the original owners were, like, the best sausage makers back in Vienna?” I shrug. “I dunno. Maybe that’s just internet hype. If it sucks, we can get back in the car and—”

He cuts my words off with a deep kiss, wrapping his arms around me and sliding his fingers into the back of my hair. I groan and kiss him back, hungry for his taste, inhaling his scent and losing myself in him.

“Who the fuck are you,” I groan, pulling away. “And what have you done with Roman Nikitin?”

He gives me a puzzled look.

“You just kissed me,” I murmur. “In public. It’s *daylight*.”

His cheeks burn. “I—I mean, we’re—”

“Just fucking with you, wreckage,” I grin, kissing him again. “I brought us out here so we could do what you just did. Kiss. Have a date *out* as a couple.”

His mouth twists. “I—I’m working on it—”

“Roman.” I shake my head. “You don’t *have* to work on shit. I don’t care.”

I don’t need him to roll out a banner or fly a pride flag off the Empire State Building. He’s out to me, our friends, and most importantly *himself*.

That’s truly all I care about.

He smiles as he pulls me tighter, kissing me again.

“So,” I shrug after we break apart. “Ready to choke down some big wiener schnitzel?”

He erupts in laughter. I grin at him.

“I have *literally* been waiting all fucking day to say that, by the way.”

“I’d love to,” he chuckles as he cups my face. “And after that…”

“*Yah*,” I growl in a truly atrocious Schwarzenegger accent. “You vant some *mohr* viener schnitzel vor za dessert, yah?”

He cracks up.

I do too.

Then, hand in hand, we walk inside for our reservation.

It’s amazing. All joking aside, the wiener schnitzel is fucking *banging*, the bartender is some hipster cocktail nerd who whips up these truly *insane* mocktails with sage, plum, and egg white in them, and the service is fantastic.

And the company?

Outstanding.

We laugh. We hold hands. We eat a *lot* of sausages and wiener schnitzel. Honestly, it’s quite possibly the best evening of my life.

…Until we walk back across the street to the car, and the van roars up next to us, and the men in black balaclavas jump out, jamming us with tasers.

And then suddenly I'm screaming his name as the bag is shoved over my head, drowning me in darkness.

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ROMAN

THE LIGHT BLINDS me as the bag is yanked off my head. I frantically look left and right, but the harsh glare in my eyes after the last God knows how many hours spent with a bag over my head has me seeing nothing but white spots against an even whiter background. I try to stand, but the rough bite of rope against my ankles and thighs, and at my wrists pulled behind my back, stops me.

Gloved fingers pinch the edge of the tape covering my mouth, and I flinch as it's torn from my lips.

"VAL!"

His name is the first thing that erupts from my throat. I look around blindly again, my pulse roaring as pure adrenaline and fear careen through my body.

"VAL!"

"*Roman?!*"

"Val!" I scream when I hear him call my name from somewhere to my right. "Where—"

I grunt, fireworks exploding in my head as the back of a hand smashes across my mouth. My head snaps to the side, blood spraying from my split lip as I hiss.

I flinch as the hand grabs my chin, angling my face up. The light blazes into my eyes, and I blink against the blinding glare until slowly, I can make out shapes.

People—men—are standing around me, a spotlight angled into my face. I smell cigarettes and vodka, then damp, stale air and the coppery scent of blood.

“Cut him loose.”

A chill rips down my spine when I hear my father’s voice, calm and icy.

“Mr. Nikitin, I don’t think that’s wise.”

I go still at the sound of the second voice—gruff, with a distinctly South African accent.

“I said *cut him loose*.”

Hands yank at my wrists. I grunt, blinking again against the harsh light in my eyes as a cold, sharp blade grazes my wrist before it slices through the ropes. My ankles are next, and then the bonds around my thighs.

“Val!” I lurch from my chair and whirl to the right. I'm immediately shoved back down, but I lash out, swinging wildly and jumping up again. This time, I’m rewarded when my fist crashes into soft flesh.

“*Fuck*!” a voice—also South African—snarls. “Little fucker hit me!”

“I fucking *told you*,” the first voice hisses. “Don't cut him—*oh*, *fuck this*.”

I grunt as a fist slams into my stomach, knocking me over.

A scuffle breaks out, and I hear shouting and raised voices, yelling both in English and Russian. Then one louder voice silences them all.

“ENOUGH!” my father booms.

For a second, I feel something I haven’t really felt since mom died—the sense that there’s a parent here who wants what’s best for me. Who’ll protect me.

“*Papa*—”

The hand slams across my mouth again, sending blood and spit streaking across the floor. I groan as I'm grabbed at the front of my shirt and slammed backward into the chair.

"*Sit. The fuck. Down.*"

The light is swung away so that it's not shining right in my eyes, and everything comes into focus.

My father stands in front of me, looking at me with such pure hatred that it freezes me for a second. Gunner and his two stooges are right behind. Past them I see Stepan, looking furious. Two of my father's men are holding him back, his hair messed up and the side of his mouth swelling, like he just got hit.

Guess that was the scuffle.

He looks right at me and shakes his head, his jaw tight. But I can't really focus on anything right now except…

I choke as I twist my head to the right.

"*VAL*!"

I lurch from my chair. Instantly, my father's fist crashes into my jaw, slamming me back down. I tense when I feel the cold blade against my throat.

"Do not fucking *move*," Papa hisses furiously.

But I barely hear him as I whip my head around to stare at Val.

No.

He's bound to a chair. Blood drips from his nose and his mouth, and his right eye is purpled and swelling shut. I surge against my father's grip on my shirt, but when I feel the steel of the blade in his fist bite my skin, I go still.

"Do not *test me*, Roman," he snarls. "With how I feel about you right now?" He turns and spits onto the ground. "Cutting your throat might be a *mercy*."

My pulse jumps as I glare up into his face.

We're in a dingy, windowless basement, with half-smashed café tables and chairs shoved into one corner and a couple of utterly foul, grimy couches against the wall. Pinup posters of nude women are tacked up, and a makeshift bar made from plywood is littered with various bottles of alcohol, with a microwave and an electric tea kettle at one end.

I know this place.

It's the old nightclub.

When my eyes drop to the rusty stain on the cement floor, my blood goes cold. That's where Gunner and his men…

I swallow as I try to suppress the flashbacks of Papa forcing me to watch after they caught his girlfriend who ran off with that jewelry.

Papa chuckles quietly. "*Da*, you do remember this place." He turns to point his knife at the rusty stain. "She was very pretty, eh?" He turns to chuckle—*chuckle*—at Gunner. "Well, before this one here skinned off her face, eh?" He and the South African both laugh in a way that makes me sick.

I turn to Val, looking my way. His lips part, and he winks with his good eye as he gives me a bloodied smirk.

"Not *exactly* how I saw our date going, wreckage," he groans. "But you, all tied up—"

One of Gunner's men walks over and punches Val in the face.

"NO!!" I roar, lurching from my chair. My father slams me back down and puts the tip of his blade to my chin.

"*Pakhan*!"

Stepan wrestles in the grip of the two men holding him, his eyes blazing.

"*Pavel*," he hisses. His eyes dart to me, his face hollow and gaunt. "Enough!" He gestures in my direction. "This is your *son*!"

"*Da*, my *son*." Papa spits venomously, turning to sneer at me in disgust. "My son, the *pidoraz*."

Icy coldness slices into me to have my own father look at me with such hatred. He turns and spits on the ground, his face souring.

“I thought Gunner had lost his touch,” he growls. “When he came to me and told me he hadn’t found the girl. But then he said that he *had* found my son spending all his time with this fucking sissy!”

He turns and jabs the knife at Val, then drags his cold gaze back to me.

“I told Gunner it was impossible,” he snarls. “I told him my son was no queer. My son is a man! My heir! My blood!”

“*Papa*—!”

I grunt, my head smacking sideways as my father’s hand crashes across my mouth.

“FUCK YOU!!” Val roars, struggling in his binds and causing the chair legs to rattle on the floor. “Fuck you, you fucking—!!”

Gunner walks over and slams a fist into Val’s stomach, doubling him over.

“Someone needs to change this one’s tampon, I think,” he chuckles, kicking Val hard in the shin.

My father turns back to me, lifting my chin with his knife. He looks down his nose at me coldly, slowly shaking his head side to side.

“Generations of real men built the empire you were born to lead,” he snarls in disgust. “And you throw it all away to bend some little fairy over and fuck him up the ass…”

I grunt when he backhands me again. But then I smirk.

“Actually, Papa…” I spit blood on the floor, splattering his shoes. “*He’s* the one who bends *me* over—”

My father punches me so hard that I go toppling backward with the chair. Stepan scrambles towards me, but Papa is already kneeling astride my chest, raining punches down.

“I did *not*—!”

He splits my lip open.

“Raise you—!”

Blood explodes from my nose.

“To be a fucking *sissy queer*!” he roars, crashing his fist into my mouth once more. Stepan shoves away the men holding him back and rushes over. He yanks my father off me and shoulders between us.

“PAVEL!” he roars. “No matter anything else, he is still your *son*!”

“Get the fuck out of my way, Stepan.”

Stepan shakes his head. “Pavel, I’m your number two—”

“So *act like it*!!” Papa roars.

“I swore an oath to the Bratva. I have allegiance to you, of course, but my oath is to *the brotherhood*. That means my oath is to Roman, too, as its next *pakhan*.” He glances back at me on the ground, his brow caving before he turns back to my father. “*Pakhan*…my oath prevents me from letting you kill him.”

My father glares murderously at Stepan. His gaze shifts past him to me, his lip curling.

“*You disgust me*,” he hisses.

He turns away, viciously swearing in Russian.

“Get him up,” he growls. When nobody moves, he whirls on his men. “I said *get him up!*”

The two Nikitin men rush over and lift me off the floor. They start to lower me back into the chair, but Papa shakes his head.

“No,” he grunts. “There.”

He points to a spot on the floor right in front of Val. I stumble slightly as they haul me over. But when I get close to him, it all fades away: the pain, the fury, the urge to roar at the world.

It all disappears as my eyes lock with Val's.

"How's my hair," he grunts, his mouth bloodied.

I smile weakly back.

Papa slowly walks up behind me. "So this is why your fiancée ran off with another man," he sneers. "Better to whore herself out to one of her *guards* than marry a fucking *pidoraz*?!" He spits on the ground. "I don't blame her."

He starts to walk around me, his nostrils flaring, his hands behind his back.

"I tried with you, boy."

"*Papa*—"

"*Be silent*!" he snaps. "I tried to raise you to be a man who could lead the Bratva with strength and honor."

"I *will* lead—"

He cuts me off with a sharp laugh.

"You think any of these men will follow a little *pidoraz*?" he blurts, incredulous. "You think they will go to war, taking orders from a little fairy bitch?!"

His men are silent, but Gunner and his goons chuckle amongst themselves.

I drag my eyes away from Val to look my father right in the eye.

"No matter what you think I am," I growl. "And no matter whom I love—"

"*Love*!" he barks, tossing his head back with a throaty laugh. "He thinks taking it up the ass from another man is *love*!"

His laugh dies away when I grab him by the collar and yank him close.

"*I. Love. Him*," I snarl coldly. "And there is nothing about that which will make it impossible for me to lead this brotherhood one day." My eyes narrow. "*Nothing*."

The room goes quiet. Oddly, my father doesn't shove me away, or even try to remove my hands from his shirt.

Stepan moves toward us. "*Pakhan*—"

"Be silent."

Papa's still looking right at me as he holds up a finger to silence his number two. He stares at me a long moment.

"Well, well," he finally hisses. "There's still fight in you. Maybe you haven't lost *all* your manhood, boy."

He turns to level a vicious look at Val. Slowly, a dark smile creeps over my father's face.

"You want to lead this brotherhood, Roman?" he murmurs. His eyes drag back to mine. "Prove it." He slaps me hard in the chest. "Prove to me you're still a man. Prove to me that you haven't grown a fucking pussy between your legs, that you still have a cock and balls."

"Oh, trust me," Val snickers. "He's got *plenty* of cock and—"

I snarl when Papa backhands Val across the mouth. My father turns back to me, his dark, lined face full of malice and hatred.

"Let me give you a lesson in what it means to be *pakhan*, boy," he snarls.

He pulls a gun from his jacket, his eyes locked with mine.

"It means one's duty is to lead the brotherhood. That comes before anything else." His eyes narrow. "For me, that includes *you*."

It's nothing I didn't already know, but it still cuts like a blade to hear it.

"I'm going to make this easy." He cocks the gun, chambering a round. "You might be my blood, Roman, but right now?" He shakes his head. "Right now, you are no son of mine. Which means…"

"NO!" Val roars, slamming against his binds as my father places the gun to my forehead.

“PAVEL!” Stepan bellows, trying to rush my father. But Gunner shoves him back, leveling his pistol at my father’s number two.

My pulse jackhammers and my throat works as I meet my father’s gaze down the barrel of a gun.

“Two things can happen right now, boy,” Papa growls. “I can shoot you in the head and spray your brains all over your little boyfriend’s face. Or?” He smiles cruelly. “You can prove to me that you still have it in you to be *pakhan*. To be a fucking *man*!” He pulls the gun away from my forehead and aims it at Val. “Prove it to me, Roman,” he snarls. “Kill this fucking cockroach.”

He looks back at me.

“With your fists.”

My blood turns to cement and my heart stops as my eyes lock with Val’s.

I don’t see anything but a person who loves me.

A person that *I love* with all my heart.

A man who sees me for who I am, and makes me want to *be* who I am.

A man I’d give my last fucking breath for.

“No.”

The word falls rasping from my lips as I lock eyes with Val.

“I won't—”

“*Roman*!”

Val chokes out my name, and I freeze when I feel my father’s gun pressed to the back of my head.

“Hit him,” he says quietly. “Right now, or I swear to you, boy, I will splatter your blood all over his face, and I *will not* mourn you after I do.”

“*Pavel*, *please*,” Stepan hisses. “What the fuck is this!?”

“A course correction,” Papa growls. “Before he and his *perversions* destroy an empire. Now…”

The gun presses tight against my skull.

“Hit. Him.”

My eyes lock with Val’s. He smiles wryly, arching a bloodied brow.

“I mean, you can’t say you’ve never wanted to, right?”

I slowly shake my head. “I—”

“Hit me,” Val hisses, his good eye holding mine. “Just shut up and *hit me*.”

My head shakes again, my jaw tensing. “No—”

“Hit me, you little bitch!!” Val roars.

“*Stop it*,” I hiss.

“HIT ME, PUSSY!” he roars again before he spits a wad of blood at my feet. “Such a whiny, pathetic *pussy*!” he snarls. “So fucking *weak*!”

I’m shaking as my eyes blaze into his.

“*Goddammit*,” I choke. “Shut the fuck—”

“You never meant *shit* to me,” Val spits, laughing coldly. “Just another straight boy to fuck with. That’s my thing: finding confused, needy fuckers like you and turning them out.” He sneers at me as my eyes widen. “I don’t love you. I could *never* love such a fucking pathetic little bitch.”

I snap, my heart wrenching as I wind up and slam my fist into his jaw. My father and some of the others roar with laughter as I grab the back of Val’s head. I lean in, my vision blurring and my teeth bared as I press my forehead to his.

“*I fucking love you*,” I choke, shaking.

“*I know*, baby,” Val croaks, blood dripping from his mouth as his gaze holds mine. “Which is why I need you to fucking hit me. I can’t watch them kill you.”

“*I fucking can’t—*”

“*Just do it!*” he screams, his face contorting as his one good eye blazes icy blue into me. “*Please don’t make me watch you die, wreckage*.”

There are tears in my eyes as I stand, wind back, and punch him again.

Then again.

I manage a third blow before I realize there’s no fucking way I’ll ever hit this man again, and I *will* die before that changes.

“*There's* my boy!” Papa bellows, clapping me hard on the chest. “My *blood*!!” There’s a manic light in his eyes as he grabs my hand, shoves his gun into it and then jerks my arm out, so that the barrel is pointing at Val’s face.

“For the sake of your family,” he snarls. “For the sake of your fucking bloodline, and this empire.” He slaps my face and then gets right in it, his eyes blazing. “*Shoot him*, Roman. *Cut* this fucking cancer from your body. Show me that you are still a fucking man, and shoot—”

“No.”

Despite all the chaos, adrenaline and pain searing through my veins, I know with every fiber of my being that this will not happen.

I turn to my father.

“I’m not going to shoot him.”

“Roman,” he snarls. “So help me fucking God, I will—”

I raise the gun in my hand and point it right at my father's face.

“Or you’ll *what*, Papa,” I hiss. “I’m not shooting him, or hitting him, or hurting him in any way. I *love him*,” I snarl. “What you’re asking me to do is to cut out my own heart, and I can’t and won’t do that. So…” I feel power roar through me as my muscle clench. “This is done. All of it. I’m walking out of here with him, and you and I will never speak again.”

He smirks. “Ahh, such a big man now, eh? Calling the shots?” He leers at me. “You think this is the first time I’ve had a gun pointed at me? You

think—”

“No, I don’t.”

My father’s eyes bulge as I pull the gun away from his head…

…and point it at my own.

“*Roman*!” Stepan hisses. “What the *fuck* are you—”

“I’m his only son,” I say, my teeth clenched. “Without me, he *has* no future empire,” I snarl at my father. “I'm the last of your bloodline, Papa. This is me holding hostage *your only chance* of seeing our forefathers' legacy continue. And now he and I,” I say, jabbing a finger in Val's direction as I level a cold glare at my father, “are going to walk the fuck out of—”

Pain explodes through my head, my vision shattering into fireworks as I go crashing sideways. The gun is wrenched from my hand as I stumble to one knee. When I look up, I see Gunner standing over me, holding my weapon and the one he just used to pistol-whip me.

The room goes silent, the full weight of what I just did hitting me.

“*Pavel*…” Stepan says calmly. “This has gone far enough. Let’s—”

“My *only* chance at a legacy?” Pavel grunts, laughing bitterly. “I have news for you, boy. I am still virile. I’ll *make* another fucking heir, with a whore if need be.”

My heart drops.

“Tie him to the chair.” My father’s voice is devoid of emotion as he turns to nod at two of Gunner’s men. “Do it. Now.”

“Pavel!” Stepan shouts, shooting looks at the two other Nikitin men, who look equally uncomfortable.

I grit my teeth as Gunner’s goons shove me back into the wooden chair. Val is yelling at them to go fuck themselves as my arms are yanked behind me and bound at the wrists.

“Wire it up, Gunner,” my father says tightly.

I frown, not understanding. Then one of the mercenaries unzips a duffle bag and pulls out a brick of plastic explosive with a control switch attached to it.

“What the *fuck* is this?!” Stepan yells. “Pavel!!”

“*This*, Stepan,” my father says quietly, “is what happens when my fucking *blood* decides to point a gun at me.” When he turns to look at me, I don’t see any shred of a father, or love of any kind.

Just dead, black emptiness, tinged with hate and disgust.

“It’s no secret that I use the club upstairs for meetings from time to time, is it, Stepan.” He smiles icily, not waiting for an answer. “We’ll say that this one”…he points at Val…“came here tonight to try and sabotage this place by setting another Obsidian Syndicate bomb, as directed by his brother.”

The color drains from my face.

“And that my brave son, Roman, tried to stop this little maggot from trying to kill me. Alas…” His smile turns cold and vicious, his eyes blackening as they stab into me, without a single speck of love.

“Alas, in their fight, the bomb went off.”

The full weight of what he’s saying slam into me. I knew my father was cold and calculating, but I suppose the fact that I have *humanity* in me stopped me from ever seeing him go this far..

I’m going to die here tonight, along with Val.

My father will get sympathy from allies and neutral parties alike at the tragic loss of his son and heir. He’ll also hit Vaughn hard, by taking his only family.

It’s…brilliant, in a way.

And monstrous.

I stare at him, and even though part of me wants to scream at him that whatever he feels about who and what I am, I am still his *child*—I don’t.

I don’t bother.

Because it’s hearing his intensions spoken out loud that make one thing crystal clear to me: I don’t have a father anymore, and Pavel Nikitin no longer has a son.

“Pavel, this is madness!!” Stepan roars. His eyes dart to me, filled with terror.

Gunner just chuckles, shaking his head as he crosses the room. “Making a cup of tea,” he grunts over his shoulder. “Any of you?”

“*Ja*, boss. I’ll take one,” the guy setting up the bomb mutters.

“Hey—wreckage.”

I twist my head, my pulse thudding in my ears as I stare into Val’s eyes.

“Sorry about the shitty date,” he smiles sadly. “I swear, I had better plans for the end of it.”

“Val—”

“Don’t,” he says. “Just know that I’ve never loved anyone like I love—”

An anguished sound rips from my throat as one of Gunner’s men slaps a strip of duct tape over Val’s mouth.

My heart races as my eyes sweep the room. When my gaze lands on the man setting up the bomb on the café table across the room, I go still.

My eyes zero in on the box with the digital display that he pulls out of the duffel bag and starts wiring into the control board of the bomb.

A little rubber neon orange box, with Chinese lettering on the side of it.

Exactly like the one Vaughn showed me from the safe house bombing.

Suddenly, the pieces fall horribly into place.

“It was you,” I growl, staring at the man. He lifts his gaze from what he’s doing, frowning at me.

“The fuck did you say?”

“It was *you*,” I snarl, nodding at the timer in his hand that is *identical* to the one Vaughn said is incredibly rare to see used outside of the Chinese military.

The man’s eyes narrow.

“What are the odds,” I mutter, “that military tech that’s barely ever seen outside China gets used twice in the span of weeks, in the same American city.”

Stepan's jaw tightens before he walks over to me. “What are you saying.”

“That timer,” I growl, dipping my chin at the orange device. “It’s the same type used at the safe house.”

He scowls. “You have proof—”

“Yes,” I hiss. “It's sitting on my desk at home.”

Fire ignites in Stepan’s eyes. His back to Gunner's goons, he slides his hand into his jacket pocket and starts to pull out his gun.

“*My okruzheny vragami i predatelyami!*” he barks, looking at the Nikitin men.

We are surrounded by enemies and traitors.

It all happens in the blink of an eye.

Stepan and the two Russians whirl on Gunner’s men, who drop what they’re doing, lurch to their feet and yank out guns. Gunner himself whirls from where he’s been waiting for the electric kettle to boil, a pistol gleaming in his hand.

“Stepan!!” my father roars.

Stepan’s jaw stays tight as he points his gun at one of the mercs.

“Pavel,” he mutters, glaring at Gunner. “These men are traitors.”

“Lower your weapon, Stepan,” my father growls.

“I don’t think you heard me,” my father's number two says. “These men—”

“I heard you fine,” Pavel replies. “*Lower your weapon*. That’s a fucking order.”

“*Pavel—*”

“They are *not traitors*, Stepan!”

It hits me at the exact same moment that it does Stepan. I watch my own emotions bloom across his face—shock, refusal to believe the obvious.

Betrayal.

Because if Pavel isn’t surprised to hear that Gunner’s men set up the bomb at the safe house…

Stepan’s face goes haggard as he stares at my father.

“*Pakhan*, Nikolai Antonov is a powerful ally. A *friend*!”

My father says nothing.

“You didn’t—”

“And if I did?!” Pavel snarls. “That is *my* decision to make! *I* am in charge, Stepan! “So lower your fucking—”

He shuts up when Stepan’s gun swivel from Gunner to *him*.

“A war with the Antonov family would destroy us, Pavel,” Stepan growls. “It would level this empire.”

“Stepan, I’m not going to tell you again—”

“My *oath* is to this brotherhood, *pakhan*. That comes before anything else.”

He glances at me, his face tight. Then he turns to the two Nikitin men.

“Untie Roman.”

One of them takes a step toward me. But the instant he lowers his gun, Gunner suddenly yanks a second pistol out of the holster at his hip, and the whole room goes from zero to two hundred miles an hour in *milliseconds*.

The air is filled with the sound of cocking guns. Stepan is aiming at Gunner. Gunner is aiming at Stepan and one of my father's men. The Nikitin guards and Gunner's mercs are aiming at each other.

For a moment, the whole scene seems utterly frozen, like a still-life painting, or something caught on a Polaroid. The air itself seems to stop moving. Not one single person moves, breathes, or makes a fucking sound as the tension wraps and slithers around everyone's throats like a noose.

My pulse ticks. I slowly drag my eyes to the side, meeting Val's. He swallows, staring right back at me, and even though I can't hear him, and can't read his lips, I *know* what he's saying when his jaw works behind the duct tape.

I love you.

I love you too, I mouth silently back.

The tension keeps pressing down with unbearable pressure.

The air crackles.

Muscles twitch.

Then suddenly, the electric kettle dings loudly…

…And all hell breaks loose, in a hail of violence and gunfire.

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VAL

WHEN I WAS FIFTEEN, I was trying to impress some of the other kids in the foster home I was in, by riding my bike down Duffy's Hill, a stretch of Lexington Avenue between 102nd and 103rd Streets, which also happens to be the steepest hill in New York.

The challenge, of course, wasn't just to bike down it, but to do it faster than the previous record. And like I said, I was trying to impress people.

So I went fucking *fast*.

I went so fast, in fact, that I broke a pedal, lost control of the bike and then veered to the side, where I hit the back bumper of a parked Honda Civic and went smashing head-first through the back window.

That, to memory, might be the most chaotic moment of my life. The surging, choking feeling of adrenaline pouring into my system. The explosion of pebbled glass shards. The tearing, searing pain and the absence of gravity.

But it's that fractured moment, when the throbbing silence and frozen figures are shattered by the ding of that fucking electric kettle going off, that puts the bike crash to shame. Because when that chime goes off, *hell itself* is unleashed, like a cannonball to the fucking chest.

It feels like a thunderclap going off inside my head as the room is *filled* with exploding gunfire. Cement dust, wood shards and blood spray into the

air as one of Gunner's guys and one of the Nikitin guards go flying backward, their bodies ripped apart by the spray of bullets.

Pavel’s number two goes down next, crashing behind one of the grimy couches with blood pouring from his shoulder.

Something heavy suddenly slams into me from the side, sending me crashing across the floor. I grunt into the duct tape over my mouth as my head bounces off the cement. My vision blurs as something heavy lands on top of me.

“*Hang on!*”

Through the hail of bullets and the explosions of dust and blood and screams, that voice grounds me.

The heavy thing on top of me is *Roman*.

He grunts, wrenching himself sideways and roaring as he shoves back. He rolls off me, smashing into the floor so hard that the creaky wooden chair he’s tied to snaps. He yanks his arms and legs free, and then he’s scrambling back to me, throwing his body across mine, ripping the tape from my mouth.

“*Are you hit*?!”

I don't actually know. I can barely think.

I’ve seen plenty of violence in my life. But it's been bullying, street fighting, or the sexual violence that was committed against me when I was a kid.

A full-scale gun fight in an enclosed space has me *frozen*.

But not Roman.

I stare at him, awestruck, as he whips his head around to scan the ongoing carnage, his eyes ablaze.

“Stay here!”

Right, because I’m going *anywhere* tied to a chair.

He pushes off me just as a scream rips through the room and the second Nikitin guard throws his hand over the geyser of blood that has erupted from a hole in his neck. Another shot blasts past him, turning one of the liquor bottles on the improvised bar behind him into shards, liquid spilling onto the floor.

A roar fills the room as he drops his muzzle-hot gun into the pool of high-proof liquor, igniting the whole bar.

My pulse spasms.

Holy fuck.

My gaze shifts, and I stare as Roman crosses the room in a blur. The South African guy who appeared to be in charge is standing over the man who was telling Pavel to back off, leveling his gun at him.

Roman crashes into the South African, sending his shot wild as they both go slamming into the wall.

Another bottle of alcohol explodes like a grenade as the flames reach it, sending liquid fire spraying across the room.

But I'm not watching that.

I'm watching the man I love turn into a *demon*.

I've always loved that Roman's this big tough guy who becomes a whimpering, subby mess in my hands. Now, I'm watching the opposite happen.

Pure fury twists his shockingly gorgeous face, transforming him into a monster from some dark fantasy. He whirls, slamming his forearm into the other guy's face, crushing his nose and sending blood everywhere.

Goddammit, I think I'm hard.

I roar a warning when I see the other guy reach for a huge knife on his belt. But before he can get to it, Roman twists the gun out of his other hand. He jams it up into the guy's chin, slamming his head against the wall before suddenly—

Holy SHIT.

The man’s skull turns to red mist.

Roman barely even blinks. He turns, blood drenching his face and shirt like every psycho killer jerk-off fantasy I’ve ever had. His eyes blaze as he raises the gun and fires. The last of the South African guys grunts and doubles over, trying to bring his gun back up, but just as a second bottle of alcohol explodes, Roman gets to him.

He grabs the guy by the throat, slams him across one of the café tables, and puts a bullet through his head.

The entire bar goes up with a *whooshing* roar, erupting into a fireball that sends Roman flying.

“ROMAN!!”

I snarl and kick at the ropes, heedless of the way they cut into my skin. I manage to get an ankle free, but suddenly, he’s there.

“Hang on!!” Roman screams. He’s got a knife in his hand, and he drops to his knees, cutting the ropes around my ankle and my wrists, setting me free.

I don’t give a fuck that the world is literally on fire. I don’t care that all I can smell is smoke and ash and blood and death.

I grab his face, and I fucking kiss him like the world is ending, and I want to taste his fucking moans as I die.

He breaks the kiss *way* too fast. I glare at him, then I frown at the way his face is paling and his eyes widening as he stares at my chest.

I look down, and the floor drops out beneath me.

Shit, that’s not good.

Blood is blooming across my shirt over my chest. A lot of blood.

That’s…really not good.

Roman doesn’t say anything, just scoops me into his arms.

“Stay with me!” he screams.

I wrap my arms around his neck, wincing when I start to feel the pain in my chest. Roman sprints across the room and crashes through the door into a dank stairwell. He rushes up the steps, holding me tight. When we reach a darkened nightclub Roman charges across floor, and suddenly, we're crashing out the front door into the gloom of the street.

Both of us are coughing up smoke as he bolts across the street to an old parking lot and sets me down. My head swims as Roman rips open my shirt.

“*Fuck you, stay the fuck with me!*” he bellows. He tears off his own shirt and presses it to the sticky, painful wound in my chest.

“It’s just a graze!” he yells, grabbing my hand and pressing it to the shirt. “Keep pressure on it!”

When he stands, I frown. “*Where—*”

“*Stepan is still down there!”*

Suddenly, he’s dropping to his knees, cradling my head, kissing me fiercely.

“*I love you*,” he rasps.

He presses something heavy into my other hand. I look down and blink when I see the gun.

“You know how to use this?”

“I…watch movies?”

Roman smiles grimly. “Be right fucking back.”

Then he’s gone, rushing back across the street and crashing through the front door of the abandoned club. Smoke is billowing out the door as it swings shut behind him, and I can smell the burning from here.

The seconds tick by. My heart thunders against my bloody chest as lethal, horrible dread twists and snakes around my middle, cinching tight.

Don’t die on me, motherfucker.

You don’t get to fucking leave like this, wreckage.

…Yeah, fuck this.

I grunt as I struggle to my feet and start to stagger back across the road. My head is swimming, and god*dammit*, my chest hurts.

The frosted windows of the club begin to glow.

Smoke is streaming freely from under the door.

Roman.

I force my feet to move faster, stumbling across the street.

And then four things happen.

“YOU!”

I stop cold, my pulse hitching as I see Pavel Nikitin, blood pouring down the side of his head, staggering out from an alley next to the club, the gun in his hand pointed right at me.

His face is twisted with fury as his eyes blaze into mine.

“You *little fucking—*”

The second thing that happens is the door to the club crashes open, flames and smoke billowing out as a shirtless figure emerges, a second figure draped over his shoulders.

Roman.

That’s when the third and fourth things happen, almost simultaneously.

The gun in Pavel’s hand goes off.

…And Roman hurls himself in front of me.

The world narrows to a single pinpoint. Everything else blinks away. All other thoughts, dreams and hopes leave my consciousness and I watch in slow motion as the man I love grunts, doubles over, and drops motionless to the ground.

I just *stare*.

I stare as the light dims from my world.

As my heart cracks, splinters, and crumbles to dust inside my chest.

But then, a fifth thing happens.

I've been in more fights than I could count. I've hurt people badly, but I've never killed anyone.

In that moment, though, my reaction is immediate; instinctive.

I raise my hand, pointing the gun at Pavel as he stares at his son.

My finger squeezes the trigger.

Click.

It's empty. *My gun is fucking empty*.

Roman's father's gaze shifts to me, rage on his face as he raises his gun again.

"*Fucking pidoraz—*"

A shot erupts into the night with a heavy *BANG*. But when I flinch and step backward, nothing happens to me.

I don't collapse. I don't feel any fresh pain.

I don't *die*.

Pavel's gun drops from his hand with a clatter. His face pales, and he looks down in shock at the red blossoming across his shirt.

Then he slumps to his knees, falls to the side, and goes still.

My head whips around, and I see the man Roman just dragged out of the club—Stepan—holding one hand over his blood-soaked opposite shoulder.

…And a smoking gun in the other one.

He spits on the ground before he turns to look at me, then at Roman.

“*Val—*”

I choke as I drop to my knees, rolling Roman over. He blinks up at me.

Fuck me. He’s fucking alive.

“Stay with me, baby,” I hiss. Fuck my own wound: I pull his shirt away from my chest and press it to the gaping hole halfway down his ribs. “Stay the fuck with me, wreckage!!”

“*Val…*”

When I turn, Stepan is half-stumbling, half-running to me, waving his arms.

My brow furrows. “What—“

“*THE BOMB*!” he roars as the windows of the club behind him shatter, flames licking and crawling out of them. “*THE BOMB IS STILL IN THE—*”

The sound is like a hurricane making landfall *inside my fucking head*.

Then all I’m aware of is the feel of my arms wrapped around Roman as the very ground beneath us heaves and buckles, before Hell itself yawns wide and belches fire, lifting me clean off my feet and sending me spiraling through the darkness.

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ROMAN

I FINISH STRAIGHTENING my tie in the mirror, then reach for the cufflinks on the bathroom counter in front of me.

Fuck.

It's a lot better these days. But there are still ways I twist or turn that make the hole between my fifth and sixth ribs on the left side fucking *ache*.

On the plus side, the bullet went right through me. That's the only plus side about getting fucking shot…well, that and *living*, I guess.

The last four weeks have been, for lack of a better phrase, *fucking insane*.

I spent a full week in the hospital. Then it was a whirlwind of physical therapy, at-home nurses, and trying to sort out the political *clusterfuck* that Pavel threw up all over my goddamn feet.

None of us was in great shape when we arrived at the hospital that night. I was shot, Val was shot—though, mercifully, it *was* just a grazing glance across his sternum—and Stepan was shot, twice. Just to keep things interesting, we were also all blown halfway across the street by the force of the bomb.

The ringing in my ears is mostly gone now. So are the burns on my back from the force of the blast. But those shots in the movies of the guy calmly walking toward the camera while something blows the fuck up behind him?

Lies, trust me. Those motherfuckers would be crispy and *deaf* in the real world.

Stepan ended up staying in the hospital for two weeks longer than me. He's going to be okay, but he'll have a limp for a bit. I joked with him the other day that his dreams of playing for Manchester United might be dead in the water.

He told me to go fuck myself, so, yeah—he's feeling better.

So is Pavel.

But that's another story.

I'm scowling at my damn cufflink when Val comes up behind me and slaps a newspaper down on the counter. He looks at me sternly and jabs a finger at it.

My gaze drops, and my lips curl into a grin.

It appears Connor Leary's body has been found stuck in a rain runoff drain, bloated and missing a limb. I'm in the middle of feeling moderately bad about the Metro North maintenance employees who found him when Val whips me around to face him.

"I know that was you," he growls.

I say nothing. He peers at me. "You see what they found carved all over him?"

"Hmm, yeah. Wild."

Val's jaw sets. "I didn't ask you to fight my demons for me," he says tightly.

My eyes lock with his, and my lips curl up at the corners.

"I know."

He glares at me. I just smile back. And slowly, I watch the clouds clear from his eyes as he starts to grin back at me.

"*Fuck you*."

“*You’re welcome*,” I moan as he sinks against me, sliding his fingers into the back of my hair and crushing his mouth to mine.

His tongue slips past my lips to dance with mine as he grinds his erection against me.

“You’re not angry?” I murmur, kissing him back.

“*No*, wreckage,” he groans. His hand slides down and cups my throbbing dick. Slowly, he starts to pull my belt open as he drops to his knees. He looks up into my eyes as he slides my pants down, freeing my achingly hard erection.

“I’m not angry at all.”

His big, tattooed fingers wrap around my cock, stroking me.

“We—I can’t be late to this—” I gasp.

“Too bad. *You’re gonna be late*.”

* * *

“YOU’RE LATE.”

I tense as I feel Val bite back a chuckle, his hand covertly swatting my ass.

Stepan eyes me, his brow furrowing.

“Please… Try to be more punctual going forward.”

He turns to Val and grins, sticking out his hand to shake Val's firmly. “Always good to see you, Mr. Bancroft.”

Val nods, then turns to glance around the room.

The top five Nikitin *avtoritets* are already here, and I got a text from Bane a minute ago, when Val was making me even *more* late by making out with me in the guest bathroom down the hall, that he and his dad will be here momentarily.

“I… I can wait outside.”

My hand finds his just as Stepan shakes his head.

“No, I think it’s fine if you’re here.”

Val glances at me. I squeeze his hand. “Stay. I like having you at my side.”

He snorts. “Shit. Never thought I’d be some gangster's arm candy, but here we are.”

Stepan chuckles as I roll my eyes. “You can wait over there. Just try not to…”

“Be my usual charming, irresistible self?” Val shrugs, glancing at the group of older, gruff, stony-faced captains. “No promises.” He slaps my ass again. “Go get ‘em, wreckage.”

He winks at me and then saunters over to the captains as I sigh and turn back to Stepan. “He really *can* wait outside, you know.”

Stepan chuckles and shakes his head. “No, I find him quite amusing.”

“He…gets under your skin like that.”

He smiles and pats my shoulder. “It would appear so.”

He leans on his cane as he turns and walks with me across the room.

“The cane's a nice look, by the way.”

Stepan makes a sour face.

“I’m serious.” I glance at him, grinning. “Very distinguished. Trying to make a good impression?”

“*Da*,” he grunts. “I’m hoping the fresh-faced young king finds it in his heart to keep his old friend Stepan around as his number two.”

I look him in the eye. “I can only do this *if* you’re my number two.”

“Well, I am considering numerous other offers,” he says, deadpan. “I’ll keep you abreast of the situation.”

“Asshole,” I mutter, chuckling.

He grins, but then his brow pinches. “If we continue as planned…” He lifts a shoulder. “Pavel has many enemies in Russia. I don’t know how long he’ll live once he begins his exile—”

“Yes, which is why they refer to this as the *find out* phase.” I smile grimly. “You know, the part that comes after *fuck around*?”

Stepan smiles and nods. “Just thought I’d mention it.” He frowns. “And your sister? How is she…”

“Taking it?” I shrug. “Good days and bad. She gets it, obviously. But Evelina…”

“Always had it *a bit* easier than you did,” Stepan says, sighing. He pats my shoulder. “I’m sorry, Roman. For the way I let him speak to you, and treat you—”

“It wasn’t your fight, Stepan.”

“Perhaps it was.”

“Well, you saved Val’s life,” I reply, smiling. “Let’s call it even.”

He grins. Just then, the door to the conference room in Pavel’s house opens. Bane and his father enter first, followed by three Antonov *avtoritets* I knew they were bringing along.

I shake my friend's hand firmly before I turn to his father.

“Mr. Antonov—”

“Come now, Roman,” he chuckles. “You’re not in high school anymore and trying to pretend you didn’t just steal a bottle of vodka from my freezer. Let’s drop the *Mr. Antonov* bit. Just Nikolai is fine.” He claps me on the shoulder. “After all, you’re going to be king after today, yes?”

I smile back at him. “Well…*Nikolai*…I need to apologize for—”

“You don’t,” he says gently. He nods past me. “Let’s get to this, shall we?”

I let him walk over to the table first and hang back with Bane.

“Look, I know we talked about this already, but…” I frown. “If there’s *any* weird shit here, just tell me. What happened was fucked up—”

Bane smirks that slightly mysterious smile of his, his dark eyes flashing as he runs a tattooed hand through his hair. “All good, brother. We’re always good.” He rolls his eyes. “The fuck are you even *asking* me that for?”

He brings me in for a tight hug before he pulls back and we all take our seats. Val isn’t part of the Bratva, so it would be inappropriate for him to sit at the table with us. Instead, he sits right behind me, and I swear I can feel him checking out my ass, even though my chair has a back.

Beside me, Stepan glances at me, then stands with the help of his cane.

“My friends,” he begins. “Thank you all for being here. The purpose of this meeting, of course, is to ensure every party is aware what’s transpired the last few weeks.” He sighs heavily. “As you know by now, Nikolai…” He nods across the table at him and sighs “The bomb at the safe house that night was intended to kill you. Pavel had previously had his mercenaries wire the place up, and the bomb was under Pavel’s desk. All he had to do was turn on the timing switch, which was set to five minutes, and then walk outside for a cigar, knowing that you don’t smoke them,” he finishes grimly.

Nikolai nods, his eyes narrowed. “Except I ended up following him outside anyway, because his deal with this gaming commissioner about the casino license was too good to be true, and I smelled a fed trap.”

“Well, you were correct, my friend,” Stepan grunts. “The gaming commissioner who wanted to work out a bribe with Pavel was indeed a federal agent, working on a sting operation.” Stepan frowns. “I hate to say it, but I believe Pavel’s intent to kill you that night wasn’t just to put an end to your objections to the casino.”

“The partnership agreement,” Nikolai sighs heavily. “It was in the fine print.”

Stepan nods solemnly. “*Da*. In the event of one party’s death, the estate is forced to sell that party’s shares of the agreement to the surviving partner, *at original cost*.”

Nikolai swears darkly under his breath in Russian, but he keeps himself in check.

I clear my throat. “Nikolai—”

“Roman,” he says quietly, shaking his head. “The son does not need to apologize or atone for the sins of the father. I promise you that.”

“Obviously,” Stepan continues, “Pavel planned to frame the attack and your death as the work of the Obsidian Syndicate.” He shakes his head. “While Vaughn Bancroft declined to be here today, Roman and I are in agreement that his organization was not involved in the attack.”

Nikolai nods solemnly. “I believe you. I will not pursue anything with the Syndicate.” His jaw tightens. “Now, shall we discuss the snake himself?”

He glances at me, a slightly worried look on his face. I just nod.

“Let’s discuss him,” I growl. “Given that my father sat at the Iron Table, the rest of the Table gets some input on what happens next. Nikolai, I’m sorry—”

“Roman.” Nikolai gives me a quiet, understanding look. “You don’t need to apologize for not killing your own father. I already spoke to Kir regarding the Iron Table.” He nods. “Exile to Russia satisfies me.”

The Iron Table *did* get some input, but ultimately, this was a Nikitin decision. Stepan convinced me that executing Pavel could make him a martyr in any loyalists' eyes, and maybe cast my ascension to the throne in a bad light.

So the man I once called father is being exiled from the Nikitin empire and sent permanently to Russia. He’ll be watched. He will not be able to leave. As far as I’m concerned, he can fucking freeze and rot there.

Nikolai rolls his neck. “Now, I don’t believe we have anything further to discuss?”

“No,” I smile. “I don’t think so.”

“In that case…” He, Bane, and their men stand. I do too, shaking their hands.

Nikolai glances over at my captains. “If you have any sense, this won’t be a hard decision.”

He starts to walk out, but Bane lingers for a second. He shakes my hand and then brings me in for a hug. “You got this, brother. All hail the king.”

Before leaving with his dad, he walks past me to Val, who stands and shakes his hand. Bane leans in and murmurs in his ear. Val shrugs.

“If I ever hurt the fucker, I’ll throw *myself* out a window. How’s that?”

Bane pats my arm as he heads out. “I fuckin’ *like* that guy,” he murmurs.

Then, it’s just Val, Stepan, the captains, and me.

“Before the *avtoritets* and I convene to address any issues we might have with your ascension, is there anything you’d like to say?” Stepan asks.

This is largely a technicality. But there are rules in the Bratva. In this case, the top captains along with Stepan need to vote in a majority for me to take Pavel’s throne, because Pavel, failure of a father, shitbag, and lazy fuck that he is, never *officially* named me as his successor.

I clear my throat as I turn and let my gaze drag over the table. Then I glance at Val. He grins, points between me and himself, then makes a crude gesture only I can see involving two fingers of one hand and an “O” shape of the other.

Christ, he’s insane.

But I’m insanely in love with him, and it’s that spark of pure “Val” energy that shreds any lingering hesitation I might have as I turn to address the table.

“I was born to lead this empire,” I say boldly. “I am not my father; I didn’t receive his cruelty or malice. But I did inherit the parts of him that can lead men, make hard choices, and act when necessary. Now,” I growl, resting my knuckles on the table. “To address the elephant in the room.” My eyes narrow. “This is my empire to rule. And I *will* rule with this man at my side.” I turn and point a finger at Val. “If any of you have a problem with

me loving a man, quite frankly, you can go fuck yourselves. Any questions?"

The room goes quiet. The five of them glance at each other, then beckon Stepan over. The six of them huddle, muttering quietly in Russian for a moment.

Stepan stands and looks at me. His brow is furrowed, and there's a tight, dark expression on his face as he slowly walks back to me. He looks me dead in the eye as he rests a heavy hand on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Roman."

I blink.

Fucking *what*?

Stepan exhales again. "I'm afraid I need to trouble you to inquire as to your first order of business…*pakhan*."

"*Sneaky fucker*," Val mutters.

Stepan grins widely at me, then pulls me into a tight embrace. "*It was unanimous*," he murmurs. "And if you were my son," he continues, "I would be *very* proud to be your father." Then he releases me.

The other captains stand, bowing and calling me "*pakhan*" one by one.

Then I'm turning and embracing Val as he sinks into my arms. He cups my jaw, grinning. "I've never kissed a *pakhan* before." He winks as he whispers in my ear. "*Never fucked one, either. And I'm getting REAL hard thinking about it*."

"You're fucking nuts, you know that?" I grin.

"Well, you're a moody, grumpy fuck, did you know *that*?"

I smile wider. "Yeah. You?"

"Same." He winks at me. "I also know I love you."

"Oddly enough," I murmur, "*I* love *you*."

And then I grab the back of his head and sear my lips to his.

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EPILOGUE

VAL

Six months later:

"YOU'RE sure you want to do this?"

I smirk at the stoic, serious expression on Roman's face. I mean, it's a situation that *does* warrant serious and stoic. But I'm choosing to look at it as a celebration instead.

"Will you stop being so fucking serious about it?"

He scowls. "It *is* serious, Val. I mean it's a surgical procedure."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, but it's a surgical procedure like getting stitched up after a fight is surgical procedure." I shift on the medical gurney, tugging at the not-so-comfortable hospital gown. "Relax. I'll be in and out in time for us to go get dinner."

His brow knits. "Why don't we skip the restaurant, and just eat at the hotel—"

"Roman."

He exhales. "I'm *just* asking if you're sure."

"Well, we flew all the way here," I shrug. "Can't back out now."

The nurse steps in and smiles. “Herr Bancroft?” She says in her heavy accent. “Ve are ready for you now.”

An orderly walk in, unlocks the wheels of my gurney, and starts to wheel me out. Roman swallows, grabbing my hand.

“I’ll be right there waiting for you,” he mutters, his eyes searching mine.

I wink. “I know you will, wreckage.”

* * *

“IT…DOESN’T LOOK BAD, ACTUALLY.” Roman’s brows arch from across the table as I lift the short sleeves of my button up and peel away the bandage.

“Right?” I shrug. “I mean, it’s fresh, so it looks rough. But the swelling should go down in a few weeks.” I wink. “And then it's time for some new ink.”

Once upon a time, I was ashamed of the letters carved into my arm, so I covered it with chaos and anger, myriad lines crisscrossing to obscure the word and the scars.

As I got older, I began to accept that part of my body. I never *forgot* what was there, but I could live with it.

But then, a month or so ago, I saw an article about a doctor who was using a new experimental treatment—a mix of lasers, dermal abrasions, and mad-scientist surgical skills—to remove scars from the body. And when I saw that his offices were in *Vienna*, of all places?

Fuckin’ *kismet*.

So here we are.

My arm *does* hurt—more than I’ll ever admit to Roman. But fuck, it feels amazing not to have that brand on my body anymore. The skin won’t ever be smooth and “normal”. It’ll look more like a shiny burn spot. But it’ll be without the scars and the chaotic ink, and I'll have room for the *new* ink I’m getting there.

Roman sighs, shaking his head at me. “You’re not seriously going to get it tattooed there, are you?”

I grin, reaching across the table of the Michelin restaurant to stab at the last of the delicious *sachertorte* cake we just shared for dessert.

“Sure am.”

He blushes.

“What?” I grin. “Ashamed to have your name tattooed on my body?”

He smiles widely. “Of course not. Just...maybe…a little honored, and not sure how to thank you?”

“I can definitely think of a way you can *thank me* back at the hotel. Or, you know…” I nod across the restaurant. “The bathroom in, say…one minute?”

Roman chuckles, shaking his head. “Let's skip the ultra-romantic bathroom fuck for now. I want to show you something.” He rolls his eyes as I grin widely. “*Not* my dick.” His face flames as he looks down. “I mean, not *right this second*.”

Back in New York, it’s somewhat difficult for us to go out, just us two. I mean, the man is the head of one of the most powerful Bratva families in the world. There are tons of guards who shadow us when we go out.

Here…well, there are still guards. But only two, and they’re *very* good at giving us space.

We leave the restaurant. When I notice our car isn't waiting for us, I turn to see Roman smiling.

“Let’s go for a walk.”

“You’re the boss, *pakhan*.”

He rolls his eyes and takes my hand, and we start to walk through the Old City toward the Danube. It’s dark out, all the lights along the river glittering and gleaming.

“My name on your arm,” he muses as we start to walk over the beautiful old *Floridsdorfer Brücke* bridge that crosses the river.

“Right?” I sigh. “Guess that means we're getting serious. I mean, more serious than the whole living together and sharing a bed every night thing.”

I’ve thanked Vaughn profusely for the lavish loft, but I’ve returned it to him. I’ve got another bed where I’d rather spend my nights now.

Roman is oddly quiet as we get to the middle of the bridge. He stops walking, tugging on my hand and turning me to face him.

“I was actually hoping we might make it even *more* serious,” he murmurs.

I’m not really sure what the fucker is doing when he drops to one knee in front of me.

“Are you okay?” I ask in alarm. “Was it dinner, or—”

“Val, can you shut the fuck up?” he sighs, pulling a box out of his jacket pocket. “I’m trying to propose to you.”

I go still, blinking rapidly, my mouth falling open as I stare at the silver band sitting in the velvet box he’s just opened.

“Wait…wait…” I drag my eyes up to his. “What the fuck is happening?”

Because *this* cannot be happening. There’s still a part of me inside, even after all these months of pure bliss with this motherfucker, that whispers in my ear in the dead of night sometimes that I don’t deserve any of this.

Happiness. Or love. Or *him*.

But as I look at the ring, and the man holding it, and the promise in his eyes, the last vestiges of that voice begin to fade and scatter, blowing away like dust.

“I’m asking you to marry me, Val,” he says quietly.

“Asking?”

His eyes gleam. Fuck, I *love* this new edge he’s got since becoming *pakhan*.

“*Telling*,” he growls. “You’re marrying me.”

“That’s more fucking like it,” I groan. I grab his hand, yanking him to his feet and wrapping my arms around him. His forehead presses to mine as we look into each other's eyes and breathe the same air.

“Hell *yeah*, wreckage,” I growl quietly. “I’ll marry you.”

His mouth slams to mine, and I moan as my fingers slide into his hair, crushing him harder to my mouth so I can taste every fucking bit of him—the man I love.

The man who will roar in defiance at the darkness with me.

The man who completes me.

The man who loves me back.

And all is fucking right with the world.

* * *

The Darkest Dance series continues with Bane’s story in *Dance of Thorns*.

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Haven’t gotten enough of Val and Roman?
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This isn’t an epilogue or continuation to *Dance of Defiance*. But this extra hot “follow-up” story is guaranteed to keep the spice going.

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DANCE OF DECEPTION

Thank you so much for reading *Dance of Defiance*! If you enjoyed the book, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a review!

As mentioned, the Darkest Dance series continues with Bane's's story in *Dance of Thorns*, a dark mafia romance.

If you'd like to catch up on some of the other characters mentioned in this book, though, you can also dive in to *Dance of Deception*, Carmine and Lyra's story. There's even a sneak peek of that book on the following pages for you.

Fair warning: bring your running shoes…

You can find complete book lists and suggested reading orders on my website.
www.jaggercolewrites.com

Scroll on for a sneak peek of *Dance of Deception*.

(To avoid confusion: please remember that this book takes place before Val discovered his brother, and still believed that his own name was Vaughn.)

* * *

Chapter 1
Lyra

Ballet isn’t art. It’s war disguised as grace.

“Again.”

Every muscle in my body is on the point of collapse, but Madame Kuzmina doesn’t care. She sits in her seat, dead center, four rows back from the stage, watching us like a hawk from the shadows beyond the lights, her fingers steepled under her chin.

Vaughn exhales sharply beside me, his jaw clenched. Brooklyn doesn’t bother holding back her groan. She collapses forward, hands on her knees, sucking in air like we’ve just run a marathon.

“We’ve done it four fucking times already,” she mutters under her breath.

Madame Kuzmina raises a single hand, glittering with rings, in a regal motion. She doesn’t need to raise her voice. Her stare alone is enough to suffocate.

“And now you will do it a fifth,” she says quietly in her Russian-tinged accent, “because the fourth was fucking *garbage*.”

Vaughn and I exchange a glance. His crystal blue eyes flicker with amusement, but I don’t return the smile. I'm too exhausted.

There’s no crying in baseball. And there sure as *shit* isn’t any smiling in ballet.

Brooklyn straightens with a sigh, smoothing a hand over her leotard. “Fifth time’s the charm?” she mutters.

We begin again, running through the *pas de trois*. My mind goes blank the way it always does when I dance—nothing but the music and the movement. Vaughn’s hands on my waist, firm but controlled, lifting me effortlessly. Brooklyn spinning into position beside us.

We run through the *entire* thing again before hitting our end position perfectly, Brooklyn and I on either side of Vaughn, and for the first time

tonight, Madame Kuzmina doesn’t tell us to do it again.

Instead, she nods.

Once.

“That will do. For now.”

I hide the relief washing over me in a wave. Vaughn lets go of our hands with a dramatic groan, then flops onto his back at center stage, staring up at the ornate ceiling.

“Ballet is a fucking disease,” he announces to the air.

Brooklyn rolls her eyes and nudges his leg with her foot. “At least you get to wear flats.”

“Trust me, princess, you do not want to see me on pointe.”

Despite my exhaustion, I smile. Vaughn is chaos wrapped in infuriatingly incredible talent. When he's dancing, he moves with an effortless grace. Off stage he’s all sharp edges and wild energy, a stray dog that’s never been fully domesticated.

Madame Kuzmina rises to her feet, rearranging the silk draped over her arms. “We begin again at nine tomorrow. Arrive warmed up and ready to go.”

With that, she wraps her shawl around herself like Maleficent’s robes and melts up the darkened aisle of the Mercury Opera House, disappearing into the shadows. There’s a brief flicker of light as the door to the lobby opens and then closes again.

Naomi appears at the edge of the stage, twirling her water bottle in one hand and nodding in the direction Madame Kuzmina has gone. “Such a ray of fucking sunshine,” she deadpans.

Vaughn rolls onto his stomach. “And yet she loves me.”

Brooklyn snorts. “She tolerates you.”

Vaughn winks, pushing himself up. “Tolerates, loves, same difference.”

I shake my head and turn toward the wings, heading for the dressing room. My legs ache, and even my skin feels tired. I need a hot shower and about fourteen hours of sleep.

The dressing room is empty, since the rehearsal day was done long ago. But Madame decided to focus her keen eye on Brooklyn, Vaughn, and I and had us stay late, since we're the ones performing the pas de trois in *Swan Lake*, which the Zakharova will be performing in a few months' time.

Naomi follows me in, already undoing her bun. She's our Odette/Odile, aka, Swan Queen, for the upcoming performance. And her reason for staying late has nothing to do with Madame Kuzmina and everything to do with *herself*.

No matter how many times you tell Naomi she's amazing, she refuses to listen. I swear, the girl drinks imposter syndrome smoothies for breakfast.

"Tell me you're coming out with us this weekend," she coaxes, leaning against her locker. "Or are you going to pretend you have an exciting social life when we both know you don't?"

I smirk. "Tempting, but I need sleep more than overpriced cocktails."

As if I could *afford* overpriced cocktails. Or reasonably priced ones. Actually, even happy hour pricing might be off the table given my current financial situation.

Naomi groans. "You're such a grandma."

Brooklyn drops onto the bench beside me. "I might actually be dead by the weekend," she mutters. "Kuzmina is a fucking sadist."

"I think the word you're looking for is *Russian.*" Naomi grins.

Vaughn appears in the doorway, shoving his fingers through his shaggy dark hair. "Personally, I like my women with a touch of organized crime."

Brooklyn makes a face. "You would. And get *out*, dude. Guys' dressing room is down the hall, in case you've forgotten."

"But I get so lonely all by myself." He grins smugly before he peels off his t-shirt and slings it over his shoulder.

Vaughn has the sort of body that can only be described as “sinful”. The motherfucker has like zero percent body fat, is freaking *ripped*, and is covered in strategically placed tattoos. Coupled with his Mediterranean skin tone and vaguely Italian looks, it’s easy to see why his social calendar is perpetually filled—with dates with both sexes, I should add.

Vaughn strolls over to a locker and opens it before he turns to wink at Brooklyn. “You know I keep a second locker with my shit in here. And relax, it’s not like any of you are my type.”

He starts to take off his tights. Yeah, that’s my cue to turn around and avert my eyes. Sinful body or not, Vaughn's and my relationship—pretty much his relationship with any of the girls in the company—is more sibling-like than anything else.

Brooklyn snorts as she peels off her own tights and leotard and replaces them with underwear and yoga pants.

“I thought that your ‘type’ was ‘has a pulse and at least one willing hole’.”

“Pulses are overrated,” he grins.

“*Dude*,” Brooklyn makes sour face and shakes her head.

Vaughn laughs as he turns around, now at least wearing boxers. “Like you’d ever let me near you, baby girl.”

Brooklyn wrinkles her nose as she tosses on a hoodie. “Gross?”

Vaughn shrugs. “The feeling is mutual, and I say that with love. No, what I mean is, I don’t play hard to get. If someone doesn’t want me, I’m already gone. You want this…?”

The three of us collectively roll our eyes as he runs a finger down his ludicrously defined abs and cups his dick through his boxers.

“You have to show me you want it.”

“Yeah, hard pass, *friendo*,” Brooklyn says dryly.

“Again, the feeling is entirely mutual, baby girl.”

I giggle, turning to haul my dance bag out of my locker. I wriggle out of my leotard and wrap a towel around myself getting ready to shower, then dig through the bag, fingers searching for my MetroCard. But all I find are a few loose quarters and a crumpled one-dollar bill.

Shit. Not enough for the subway home.

I press my lips together and force the knot of frustration down.

I reach for my water bottle, catching my reflection in the mirror hanging on the inside of the locker door. My brow furrows, my gaze lingering on the way my collarbones are more prominent than they were a few months ago.

“Here.”

I jolt, turning at the sound of Naomi’s voice. She doesn’t make a big deal out of it, but passes me a granola bar.

“I’m good.”

My friend cocks one brow. “I don’t want it,” she says evenly. “So—take it.” Her eyes stay on mine. “And *eat it*,” she adds quietly.

I smile wryly as I peel open the wrapper, taking a small nibble. Naomi doesn’t know everything about my life, but she knows enough to see when things are…slipping.

Like me, Naomi is making it work by herself on her dancer's salary, somehow. The difference is, she’s got a safety net if she *really* needs it. You’d have to stick a gun to her head before she'd call her congressman father to ask for help. But the option is there.

For me, it's not. My safety net was gone long before the monster who was my father bled out in a prison cell.

Brooklyn and Vaughn are talking loudly about Kir Nikolayev, the very enigmatic Bratva kingpin who owns and bankrolls the Zakharova Ballet… specifically, how “fuckable” he is…when Naomi and I leave them and trudge to the showers.

The ache of the extra-long day melts just a little as the hot water pours down over me.

“Hey… You’re good, right?”

I turn to glance over at Naomi, who’s rinsing off at the next showerhead.

I know what she means.

“Yeah, I’m…fine.”

She pushes her long, dark hair out of her face and gives me a piercing look. “For real?”

I exhale. “Yeah, it’s just…” I shake my head. “I’m starting to wonder if school on top of this is too much.”

Between the credits I got for advanced classes in high school, and the college courses I took a few years ago, I’m about two-thirds of the way to a degree in human psychology. The lofty goal is that when ballet eventually ends—whenever that is—I’ll try my luck at the MCATs and med school, and try to become a clinical psychiatrist.

Hey, I *did* say “lofty”.

Naomi exhales as she turns to rinse off her back. “Yeah, pre-med *does* sound like a lot on top of this, even part time.” She glances at me, her brow still cocked. “Is that all?”

Goddammit, this girl always sees right through me.

“Vera’s been gambling again.”

She groans. “Are you fucking serious? I thought your mom was banned from every casino and racetrack in the state.”

“Yeah, well, she must’ve found *someone* who lets her place bets through them.”

“Shit.” Naomi frowns. “Look, I know you hate—”

“We’ll be fine,” I smile as I turn the water off. “But thanks for the offer.”

She nods, not pushing it.

Vaughn and Brooklyn are already dressed and somehow *still* talking about Kir's "big dick energy" when we get back from the showers. I pull on yoga pants and a hoodie before I remember the lack of means to get home tonight. I wince as I glance at Naomi.

"Hey, you wouldn't have a spare MetroCard on you, would you?"

Naomi's eyes flick toward my bag, where the pitiful collection of change still sits in the front pocket. She doesn't comment on it, just reaches into her wallet and pulls out her MetroCard, pressing it into my palm.

"Just take it. I'll grab a cab with Vaughn."

"Are you sure?"

She snorts. "Yeah, because I *love* the subway at midnight." She shoulders her dance bag and gives me a pointed look. "Text me when you get home, please."

Vaughn stretches dramatically, slinging an arm around Naomi's shoulders as he leads her toward the door. "My chariot awaits, milady." He sticks a cigarette between his lips, making Naomi squint.

"You light that thing anywhere near me and I'm going to knee you in the balls."

"Don't threaten me with a good time, girl."

The door swings shut behind them, leaving only silence.

Brooklyn is still sitting on the bench, one leg tucked under her, absentmindedly running a finger over the edge of her pointe shoe ribbon. The tension in her body from the exhausting rehearsal has shifted to something else.

She doesn't look at me when she finally speaks.

"You ever think about how much this actually costs us?"

I frown as I throw my gingery-red hair into a messy bun. "What? Ballet?"

She exhales sharply, shaking her head. "Not just ballet. This life. The work, all the training, the barely-there paycheck." She glances at me, one brow

lifting. “We kill ourselves every day for what? The honor of being underpaid and having a career that's over before it's even begun?”

Brooklyn’s like me: making her dance dream work on her own. No safety net.

I don’t answer right away. Truth is, I have thought about it. Every single time I pull together enough cash for rent but not groceries. Every time I ache all over but know I’ll still be back at the barre the next morning.

Brooklyn clears her throat. “Look, I understand pride, Lyra. And I’m not going to insult you by asking if you want a loan or anything. But…” The corners of her lips curl as she reaches into her bag.

My jaw drops as she pulls out a *gangster*-sized wad of cash.

“If you *do* need money…”

I blink at the thick stack of crisp hundreds, folded neatly. More cash than I’ve seen in…ever.

“What the fuck, Brooklyn?”

She smirks. “Relax. I didn’t rob a bank.”

I tear my gaze away from the money, forcing my voice to stay level. “Then where…?”

She exhales slowly. “Remember that charity thing where we did that excerpt from *Giselle* last month?”

Occasionally, mostly because it *always* results in new benefactors with deep pockets, select members of the company will perform at things like the Policemen’s Ball or other charity events.

Brooklyn clears her throat. “Well, after we were done, this guy came up to me and said he had a dance gig I might be interested in. He said he couldn’t tell me much about it, but that it paid insanely well. And… I took it. That’s where this money came from.”

A strange prickle works its way down my spine.

Brooklyn must notice the change on my face, because she quickly shakes her head. “Look, it’s not stripping or anything. No one touches you—no one even speaks to you. And you’re wearing clothes. But it pays way better than this.” She gestures vaguely around us at the dressing room. “It’s also secret.”

The word makes something inside me tighten.

Secret is never good. Secret always comes at a price.

“What do you mean, *secret*?”

Brooklyn twists the ends of her hoodie strings around her finger. “It’s like a private club or something. They pick you up at a location they decide, blindfold you, and drive you there.”

My jaw drops.

“Are you fucking serious? Brooklyn, that’s super sketch!”

She huffs a quiet laugh. “Yeah, I thought so too, at first.”

I narrow my eyes. “*At first*?”

She shrugs. “It wasn’t as bad as I thought. You change in a dressing room, where the blindfold comes off. There were six other girls—all dancers.”

“And then?”

Brooklyn exhales, her voice quieter now. “They give us fresh blindfolds, masks, and earbuds that play music synced with a voice directing us. Someone took us all out to a performance space, and—we danced.”

I don’t like how that makes my skin prickle.

“For how many people?”

She shakes her head. “No idea. I never saw them. Never heard them. But they were there, I could feel it.”

I swallow thickly.

What the fuck.

She holds up the wad of money, her brow cocking significantly. “Lyra, they pay five fucking grand for *four hours*.”

My stomach lurches.

Five. Thousand. Dollars.

That’s rent, food, security. That’s a way out from the hole my mother seems to be completely hellbent on in digging us into.

Brooklyn watches me carefully. “Listen… again, I get pride, Lyra. But I saw you counting coins…” She lifts her shoulders. “They said they might be looking for more dancers. So if you wanted…”

I shiver, feeling the invitation linger between us like a lit fuse. I swallow, eying the money in her hand.

“Look, for now…” She hands me two twenties. “Will you just take a cab home? Seriously, the subway is dangerous this late. Please? And if you’re interested in the job… Here's the number for my contact.” She finds an entry on her phone and texts it to me.

Pride wants me to refuse the money politely.

Common sense and the prospect of spending hours underground with my fingers wrapped around my keys wins out.

“Thanks,” I say quietly, taking the money. “Seriously, thank you. I’ll pay you back.”

* * *

The night air is crisp, biting at my skin as I pull my hoodie tighter around me.

“Wanna just share my Uber?” Brooklyn nods at the car waiting at the top of the alley behind the theater.

I exhale. “Maybe, actually.” I shoot her a wry smile. “I feel like you’re pampering me tonight.”

She giggles. “I mean, *yeah*. You’re my girl. C’mon.”

I start to follow her. When I slip my hand into my hoodie pocket, I groan.

“Shit.”

Brooklyn glances back. “What’s up?”

My face droops. “I left my phone in the dressing room.” I shake my head. “You know what? Go ahead. You already gave me money for a cab. I’ll just do that.”

She frowns. “Don’t be silly. I’ll wait for you.”

“Nah, go get your ride. It’s late. But thanks. And…for earlier.”

“Anytime, girl. See you tomorrow for more Russian gulag conditioning?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I groan.

I watch as she tugs her coat around herself, scampers up the alley, and slips into the waiting vehicle, red taillights disappearing into the night.

The door hisses shut behind me as I duck back into the warmth of the dim, silent ballet theater. My steps are quick as I make my way toward the dressing room.

It only takes a minute to find my phone and I stuff it into my hoodie pocket, shaking my head before slipping back outside.

This time, the door clicks shut behind me with finality.

The street is mostly empty now, the occasional honk of a distant car the only sound. The alley behind the Mercury splits halfway up to the street: continuing straight puts you onto Madison Avenue, which runs one-way north: perfect for Brooklyn, who lives up toward Harlem. But if I take the left-handed side-cut out of the alley, it’ll dump me on East 49th Street, where it's easier to get a cab going *downtown*, to the apartment I, unfortunately, share with my mother in Hell's Kitchen.

I ignore the creepy sensation that being here at midnight always brings as I hustle up the alley. I’m just about to turn the corner and head out to East

49th when I hear voices.

Low. Rough. Male.

I freeze.

The words are hushed, but I can still hear them. A weird shiver ripples up my spine as I do.

“What are you doing here? Bianca got out of rehearsal hours ago.”

The first voice is rough-sounding, deep, and somewhat frightening, with a dangerous edge to it.

My stomach knots at Bianca’s name.

Bianca got out of rehearsal hours ago.

Bianca as in Bianca Barone—well, Bianca *Drakos* now that she’s married—who's in the Zakharova with me. She’s an *incredible* dancer, super sweet, and is the youngest daughter in the Barone Italian mafia family.

I suck in a breath, pressing my back against the brick wall, forcing myself deeper into the shadows.

“No shit. I’m not here for her,” a second man growls. “What are *you* doing here, you psycho?” His voice is deep and dark, too, but also edged in something savage and viciously alluring, like a blade dragging down my spine or a dark promise whispered in my ear.

The first guy exhales sharply, irritated. “It was stupid and reckless for Matteo to hire her.”

My pulse hammers.

Her who?

“She dances *here*,” the first guy growls. “She’s friends with people like your sister. She could talk—”

“She was blindfolded, you dumb fuck,” the second man snaps. “And just what was your plan, exactly?”

The first man huffs out a breath. “I was just going to scare her a little,” he rumbles. “Remind her that the money she was paid ensures silence.”

Something inside me goes cold as things fall into place. I’m pretty sure they’re talking about *Brooklyn.*

The second man’s voice sharpens. “Stay the fuck away from where my sister dances, understand?”

There’s a tense, prolonged pause.

“Fine.” A slow exhale, like a forced truce.

“Is that a *yes* fine, or an *I’m blowing smoke up your ass* fine.”

“It’s a yes fine, calm down,” the first guy grunts. “Anyway, in unrelated news, Mushkin hasn’t responded to our summons.”

The second guy—the one with authority in his voice, the one who's driving the conversation—lets out a dark chuckle. “People rarely actually respond to a Black Court summons.”

I shrink further against the wall.

“They respond in behavior, at least,” the first guy mutters. “Mushkin hasn’t hired more security, fled, moved money. None of it. His schedule is still clear for the night of the trial, though.”

“You know how it is,” the second guy says, his voice smoother now. “Sometimes they’re so confident that they show up willingly.”

The first guy laughs, low and dark. “And if not…” He pauses, amusement dripping from his voice. “Then we get the fun of hunting them down before we even get to the chase.”

A slow shiver slides down my spine.

“Reach out to The Wolf and The Stag,” the second man orders. “Let them know the status on Mushkin. The Black Court will meet as planned.”

The Wolf? The Stag?

The *Black Court*?

Nothing about this conversation makes sense.

The sound of footsteps grows louder. They're splitting up. I panic, pressing myself deeper into the shadows, willing my body to melt into the cold brick.

Then I flinch, freezing in place as a figure rounds the corner and suddenly looms over me.

Tall. Menacing. Powerful.

Suddenly, I'm looking straight into the cold, piercing blue eyes of Carmine Barone.

My stomach drops.

I've seen him before—either dropping off or picking up Bianca, or sometimes at performances or some of those charity events. But this is different.

Up close, he's even more intense than he is at a distance. This near, he radiates raw power—and something darker, coiled beneath the surface, waiting to strike like a lethal, venomous snake. He's wearing a dark suit and an open pea-coat, molded to his broad shoulders and powerful arms like a suit of armor.

It's like black lightning striking from the shadows. Before I can even blink, his hand is suddenly on my throat, his fingers wrapping around it and settling against my jugular. It's not a choke—just a warning. A display of his strength. His power.

His control.

My breath catches.

"I—I didn't hear anything," I whisper, the words tumbling out too fast, too desperate.

His grip tightens slightly but he says nothing for a moment, those cold blue eyes piercing into me like knives, as if he's flaying open my very soul to peer inside and feast on what he finds.

His thumb traces over my pulse. “No one asked you about anything you may or may not have heard.”

A tremor ripples through my body, my eyes widening even further.

“Who *are* you?” he finally murmurs darkly, his voice low, focused, and almost sensual in the way it teases over my skin.

My heart thunders in my chest and my throat works against his hand.

“N-nobody,” I whisper again. “I’m nobody.”

Carmine’s lips curl, something between a smirk and a snarl.

“Nobody…” he muses.

His grip lingers, his fingers still firm around my throat, pressing just enough that I can feel the subtle pressure against my pulse. A test. A game.

A reminder that he could crush me if he wanted to.

His thumb moves slightly, stroking the base of my throat like he’s considering something. My skin burns where he touches me, body locked in place, muscles coiled tight. I don’t flinch. I don’t dare.

His head tilts, studying me like I’m something strange and unexpected.

“What did you hear?” His voice is a low rasp.

I shake my head as much as his grip allows. “Nothing,” I breathe.

Carmine hums, unconvinced. “Nothing?”

I gulp. “I-I was just leaving the theater. I didn’t—I wasn’t paying attention.”

His grip tightens for a second, just enough to make my pulse spike against his hand before he eases up again. “Funny,” he murmurs. “People who’ve heard nothing don’t usually look this scared.”

I open my mouth, then close it again, forcing my breathing to stay even. He’s testing me, waiting to see if I’ll break.

I can’t do that.

Men like him eat weakness for breakfast.

My fingers clench into fists at my sides. “You… You startled me, is all.”

“If this is *startled*, I’d love to see what it looks like when you’re *truly* scared.”

He says it like a desire. Like he’s already thinking about getting off to the idea of my fear.

Carmine watches me for a beat longer. Then, finally, he lets go. I suck in a breath, my skin prickling where his hand was on my throat, the ghost of his touch lingering like a brand.

He takes a slow step back, his sharp blue gaze never leaving mine.

“Well, Miss Nobody who heard nothing,” he murmurs, his lips curling into an amused and cruel almost-smile. “Let’s hope it stays that way.”

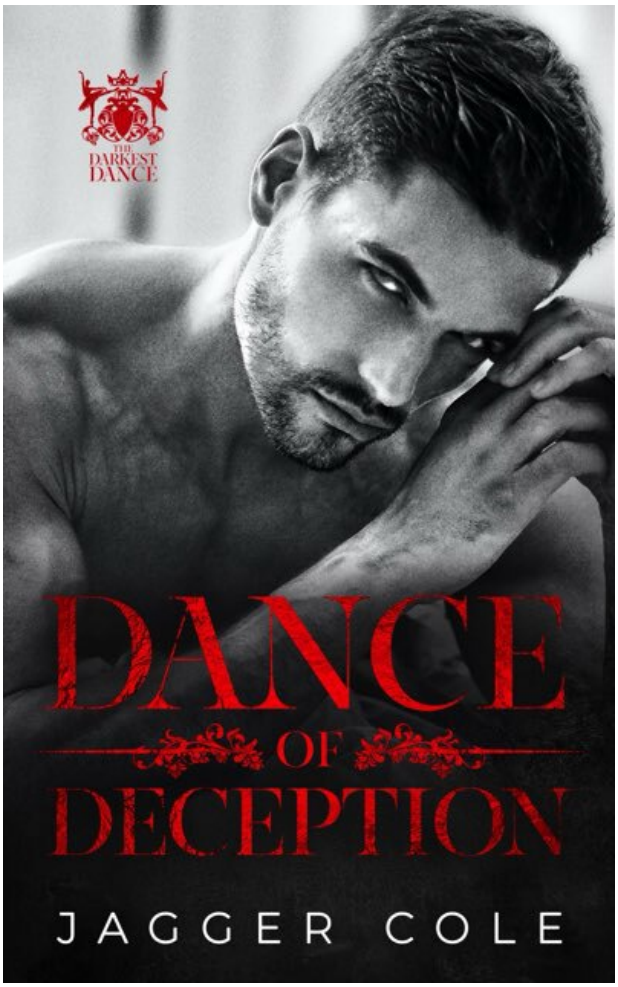
And then, just as quickly as he appeared, he’s gone, and the alley is silent once more.

The air feels heavy, charged, like the ghost of him is still standing there, watching me.

I don’t move. I don’t breathe.

Then my legs finally unlock and I’m able to stumble forward, pulse still hammering, his words pressing heavily on my spine and dragging over my skin like hot knives.

Keep reading!



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A reader first and foremost, Jagger Cole cut his romance writing teeth penning various steamy fan-fiction stories years ago. After deciding to hang up his writing boots, Jagger worked in advertising pretending to be Don Draper. It worked enough to convince a woman way out of his league to marry him, though, which is a total win.

Now, Dad to two little princesses and King to a Queen, Jagger is thrilled to be back at the keyboard.

When not writing or reading romance books, he can be found woodworking, enjoying good whiskey, and grilling outside - rain or shine.

You can find all of his books at
www.jaggercolewrites.com

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